Strong Roots

Liberation Teachings of Mindfulness in North America



Jake H. Davis

Foreword by Steven Smith

Strong Roots

Liberation Teachings of Mindfulness in North America

Jake H. Davis

Dhamma Dana Publications

at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies
Barre, Massachusetts

Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti :
The gift of Dhamma surpasses all gifts.[1]

Come and See!

1 Dhp.354, my trans.

Table of Contents

Part Two

The Blessed One said… "A person of integrity is grateful & acknowledges the help given to him. This gratitude, this acknowledgment is second nature among fine people."[2]

Imāya Dhamm'ānudhamma- pariyattiyā Buddhaṃ Pūjemi	Through this study of the Dhamma in accord with the Dhamma, I honor the Awakened One
Imāya Dhamm'ānudhamma- pariyattiyā Dhammaṃ Pūjemi	Through this study of the Dhamma in accord with the Dhamma, I honor the Teaching
Imāya Dhamm'ānudhamma- pariyattiyā Sanghaṃ Pūjemi	Through this study of the Dhamma in accord with the Dhamma, I honor the Community
Imāya Dhamm'ānudhamma- pariyattiyā Mātāpitaro Pūjemi	Through this study of the Dhamma in accord with the Dhamma, I honor my Mother and Father
Imāya Dhamm'ānudhamma- pariyattiyā Ācariye Pūjemi	Through this study of the Dhamma in accord with the Dhamma, I honor my Teachers

2 Kataññū Sutta (A.II.30), trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

To My Sources

To Karen and David Davis, my 'early teachers', and to their 'early teachers', and so on; without any one of you, this would not be;

To the Venerable Paṇḍitārāma Ovādācariya Sayadaw U Paṇḍitābhivaṁsa, the Kyaswa Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa, and Thāmanay Kyaw Sayadaw U Dhammikābhivaṁsa, who cared for me in Burma and nurtured me in the study and practice of *Dhamma-Vinaya*;

To Steven Smith and Michele McDonald, who have been friends (*mittā*) to me in so many good things (*kalayāṇā dhammā*);

To J.E.(T.) Thomas, who helped me to deconstruct my interpretation of the order of things (*dhamma*); and to Edmund Brelsford, who helped me to reconstruct my interpretation for myself and others, in particular by introducing me to the work of George Steiner;

To Joseph Goldstein, Michael Zucker, Rebecca Bradshaw, and Alan Dampog, whose caring and insightful suggestions helped to steer this work clear of a number of philosophical and political pitfalls;

To the Venerable Vajirañāṇi, U Hla Myint Kyaw, Andrew Olendzki, Mu Soeng, Grahame White, Lynne Bousfield, and U Khin Hlaing, whose shared interest in the intricacies and ironies of interpreting the *Dhamma* for Westerners and whose confidence in me helped to inspire this book;

To the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, the Venerable Khemadipa Bhikkhu, and Alan Clements; their careful reading and incisive critiques greatly improved the final product;

To Jinx Hasting and Kermit Blackwoods, who helped make this book accessible to a broader audience;

To Lynette Rummel, who sponsored my career at Marlboro College if not my senior thesis; to Geraldine Pitman de Batlle, who read through this manuscript as an undergraduate dissertation (to its great benefit) more times than I did; to Tom Toleno, who introduced me to the fundamental debates in the psychology of religion; and to Roy Wright, who helped me to think critically about Steiner's assertions and the study of language in general;

To the people of Paṇḍitārāma Sāsana Yeiktha, Kyaswa Monastery, Vipassana Hawai'i, the Insight Meditation Society, the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and Marlboro College, who have supported and challenged me in my efforts to be an interpreter and to be a truly humane being (*manussa*);

To my close biological kin as well as all my hanai, မွေးစား, and *dhamma* family;

Thank you! ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါသည်! *Sādhu*!
(*with palms together at my chest in gratitude and respect*)

Foreword

Early one morning in 1977, a friend and I were walking along tree-lined pathways at the renowned Mahāsi Meditation Center in Rangoon, after spending our first night in Burma. A dozen of us had just come from Bodh Gaya, India, where had been in meditative seclusion for several months. Toward the end of my retreat, Vipassana teachers Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield had come to BodhGaya with some students following the first 3-month retreat at the newly founded Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Coming out of retreat to greet my friends and two-year-old daughter Chandra, I arranged and managed (while being a dad as well!) the first retreat led by Western teachers in the Mahasi tradition. It was in a Thai monastery surrounded by acres of rice paddy a few hundred feet from the majestic Maha Bodhi temple and the sacred Bo Tree under which the Buddha had attained spiritual liberation 2,500 years ago.

I had come to India to practice under the guidance of Joseph's first teacher, Anagarika Munindra-ji, who in turn had practiced in Burma with one of the most prominent and influential mindfulness meditation teachers of the century: the Mahāsi Sayadaw. We came to Burma from Bodh Gaya to honor and express gratitude to this great Dhamma lineage holder who played a pivotal role in bringing the teachings out of the monasteries and into the community over the past century. The

Mahāsi Sayadaw's influence shaped the rest of our lives, and has profoundly impacted the emerging Dhamma throughout the world.

The establishment of the twenty-acre Mahāsi center in 1947, with the aid of donors including the former Premier and committed practitioner U Nu, immediately set a standard of excellence and exceptional training. This lineage of mindfulness meditation has spread throughout the world with hundreds of Mahāsi or Mahāsi-inspired centers and monasteries.

My traveling companion Alan Clements and I were up at sunrise strolling through the monastic grounds, entranced with the world we had entered the evening before. Multi-room residential living quarters and individual huts for monks, nuns, and laypeople filled the landscape; a unique mix of traditional-style teak structures and encroaching cement buildings, all donated by a society of people steeped in the practice of generosity. At the time, this was one of the most prominent practice and study centers in the Buddhist world.

Suddenly and simultaneously, Alan and I gazed at each other with the sense that we had stepped into another world and time. We were transported by a haunting, melodic rhythm of ancient sound currents wafting through the monastic compound, and pulled speechlessly toward its source. A spirited feeling trembled in my chest, at once familiar and foreign. We came upon a large hall of monks chanting Dhamma texts by memory.

The chanting was in the ancient Buddhist language of the Pāḷi texts, the monks giving voice to the Buddha's discourses, transmitted orally for centuries before ever being committed to writing. Though I did not then understand the meaning, I felt the depth and beauty of articulation in chanting form. I felt I had come home to a mystery: a profound sense of place. Here, a powerful life-transforming lineage of wisdom teachings was

preserved in their raw, original form of transmission, held in a sacred container with utmost reverence.

My practice, studies, and teaching of the Burmese tradition of Theravāda Buddhism still draw from those moments of trembling in my chest three decades ago.

Dhamma is its own intelligence. A river rolls from mountain sanctuaries, over ever-changing continental drifts and catastrophic shifts, flowing onwards to find its way from source to sea. Just so, over the course of twenty-five centuries, through the vicissitudes of cultures and civilizations developing and crumbling, Dhamma has risen and receded in the ebbs and flows of Asian history. Truth has its own mystery of survival strategies and protective measures enfolded within it, well beyond the agendas of men and women. Inspired disciples are at best simply a part of this process, finding creative ways to keep the teachings a living, relevant spiritual practice. Yet every few centuries a ground swell of Dhamma energy, interest, and revival arises, enhanced by the efforts of individuals through whose lives the current of Dhamma moves resourcefully and creatively to keep flowing through times of intense change and challenge.

In the 60s and 70s Europeans and Americans set out from the Western world on spiritual journeys to Asia, seeking out legendary masters to receive teachings leading to happiness and the peace of the pure heart's release. Buddhist meditative traditions were among the strongest attractions, perhaps in part because these teachings are offered freely. The Dhamma is regarded as priceless and therefore offered at monasteries without charge or expectation of donation for food, shelter, or teachings.

Finding practice centers and teachers in Asia was the first step. Sincere students and developing Western teachers have had to internalize these teachings so that they became real, embodied with practice, so that they became our own. Next, returning to

the West and sharing these jewels of the East, we have worked to make Dhamma practice relevant and applicable to Westerners' experience, gradually learning to integrate ancient but timeless teachings into our own culture, making the teachings ours. Like Prometheus grabbing the fire from the gods, the early seekers took the torch of Dhamma from masters of the Theravāda, the 'Way of the Elders', and then returned home, inspired to share such priceless teachings.

Within the first few years of Vipassanā practice in the West, particular parts of the integrated Eightfold Path were swept up and assimilated by Western culture. Mindfulness, for example, one of three essential factors in mental development, has been extracted from the context of the Eightfold Noble Path for various secular uses: stress relief, pain clinics, popular books on psychology, and 'enlightened' working environments. The benefits of mindfulness cannot be denied, and there are many who contend that Westerners would not practice mindfulness meditation if it were presented in the sacred container of the traditional three trainings: the ethical foundation of non-harming; training the mind in concentration; and the development of transformative wisdom. Nonetheless, all hunger for the truth of how things are, and want to know how to cultivate the beautiful qualities of ethical behavior, awareness, kindness, compassion, and wisdom.

Similarly, the modern meditation student may require creative techniques for working with the mental and emotional conditioning unique and specific to our era. Many students find an impasse when difficult emotions, early childhood trauma, and deep-seated feelings of low self worth arise in mindfulness practice. The use of modern metaphors and of supportive practices, such as meditations on loving kindness and compassion, create for many people an inner attitude of openness and acceptance while at the same time fostering

courage and heroic effort. We need such a fearless presence to face our own and others' suffering and know - without judging them - our unskillful states of mind when they arise. Such courage and openness allows for mindfulness to discern complex levels of emotional entanglement and attachment.

Adaptation of Buddhist teachings to the West includes discerning the difference between insensitive forcefulness and fierce compassion. Without this discernment, we may sabotage the aim of relinquishing greed, hatred, and delusion. Fierce compassion arises out of a powerful but non-aversive intention of heroic energy, whereas being forceful - out of craving for results or aversion to present moment experience - pollutes the natural purity and power of mindfulness.

For thousands of years, Theravāda lineages have demonstrated a commitment to preserve the essential body of the Buddha's teachings for the benefit of future generations. The primary conduit for this long transmission has been the ordained renunciates of the Theravāda Saṅgha. It is they who have preserved with deliberate discipline the Buddha's teachings in the early discourses as well as the elders' later commentaries. Without the Saṅgha's unparalleled strength, we would not have today the profound teachings of the Pāḷi Canon, sculpted to speak both simply and profoundly to individuals of every disposition, level of learning, and native ability.

With all that said, the book you hold in your hands, Strong Roots, by Jake H. Davis is a jewel of spiritual literature. Simply, it offers vision and value in how an ancient wisdom can be transmitted into contemporary culture without losing its authenticity and power. With a 'lion's roar' of confidence, clarity, and reverence, Davis inspires gratitude and gives sound guidance for the transmission of a timeless wisdom teaching - from one culture into another, from classical style to contemporary relevance, and from one era to another.

Davis is a young and gifted student and scholar of Dhamma in the Burmese lineage of the Mahāsi Sayadaw. His is a sophisticated and unique offering in Dhamma literature, addressing the glaring divides between scholars and practitioners. Strong Roots' uniqueness and rarity combines Davis' substantial personal practice under Burmese masters and senior Western teachers in Burma, North America, and Hawai'i, along with disciplined Pāḷi text study under the guidance of skilled Burmese and Western scholars.

Strong Roots challenges us to be intelligent and humble through its consistent theme of Dhamma transmission. How can Western and Asian Dhamma teachers and scholars contribute to the protection and sustainability of Burmese Dhamma lineages in the delicate process of transmission to the soils of contemporary society?

Chaos often accompanies an initial ground swell of interest and fascination in pop-culture products such as health diets, exercise regimes, therapies and spiritual paths. Nature provides ample clues to guide our way through changing conditions of the world with the intention to preserve and pass along the tradition, the vehicle for showing the Dhamma As It Is, *yathā-bhūta*. Turbulent weather systems in the Tasman Sea, for example, generate massive ground swells that move 6000 miles across the Pacific Ocean. In their movement, nature's laws of formation create beautiful shapes and long lines of waves breaking on the shores of Hawai'i a week later. Natural law is hidden within the chaos. Polynesian wayfarers exploring the blue wilderness of the Pacific Ocean on double hull sailing canoes for thousands of years found new islands in the sea. Mindful attention to turbulent systems of wind, rain, clouds, waves, currents and bird migrations, along with intuition, guided the bold explorers in 'pulling the islands out of the sea'.

In the same way, Dhamma pioneers today learn to navigate these early swells arriving in new lands and cultures. The way is often clouded and stormy: Dhamma teaching transmissions clash with new cultures. Bridging and adapting classical Dhamma teaching techniques into contemporary, relevant models challenges Dhamma teachers, scholars, and seekers alike to approach the transmission process with grace, gratitude, and mindfulness as a compass. The way to skillfully navigate the new, often disparate waters of Dhamma reaching our shores lies within.

Now, as we enter the third millennium C.E., we are fortunate to find ourselves in this whirlwind of Dhamma interest and teachings. Strong Roots is a leading edge manual, illumining the spiritual urgency of attuning with a careful ear, gratitude, and reciprocity to sustaining the purity of the original basket of teachings as they move from Asia to the West.

Guidebooks and roadmaps have not yet been created for transplanting the Buddha's Dhamma East to West and East again. Davis makes a case for the clear comprehension of this process. As the ground swell of Dhamma spreads across new lands and into new cultural settings, what forms of transmission will speak to students in the West and worldwide who hold a 'post-modern' outlook? What new metaphors of inspiration will accomplish the challenging art of knowing the mind/body, the nature of things as they are? Strong Roots offers views of how these challenges are being met from within a pioneering work in progress.

Among the most substantive themes in Strong Roots is the emphasis on gratitude: realizing where the teachings came from, who transmitted them, how they reached us. As practitioners, scholars, and teachers of Theravāda Buddhism, it seems imperative that we appreciate the sacrifices of those who came before us, especially the ordained Saṅgha, those who laid down

stepping stones for us to receive, adapt, and integrate the rare and precious liberation teachings.

How are we to honor and repay such a debt of gratitude? Sayadaw U Paṇḍita says that the best way to show gratitude is to do the practice. Meditation is practice, teaching meditation and Pāḷi texts is practice, life itself and how we live it can be practice, if we make it so.

The cycle of reciprocity has its more obvious and its more subtle aspects. Returning to the source may mean supporting our teachers and their monasteries. It may involve humanitarian projects in the country where we have received these teachings. It may also involve spontaneous collaborations where Easterners and Westerners teach retreats together both in the source country such as Burma and in areas that have only recently received this transmission, such as Europe or North America. On subtler levels, as Davis points out, reciprocity may render the Dhamma in the place of origin in new and unexpected ways, illuminating aspects of the teaching previously not fully appreciated that may now have profound relevance in the place or origin as well as the recipient culture. This seems evident already in bridging classic, traditional styles of teaching and contemporary, integrated methods and metaphors of teaching. It is also evident in the co-taught retreats led by ordained Burmese Saṅgha and Western lay-teachers. There is a beautiful mystery to this reciprocity when recipients of transmission and original lineage holders meet in the middle.

Reciprocity is the essence of Davis' inspired and insightful presentation. He gives courageous voice to the power and purpose of lineage: an authentic transmission of truth into the hearts of meditation students and a world starving for meaning. Strong Roots is a must-read for sincere students of mindfulness meditation, for teachers and scholars alike.

Davis and I share a mutual interest in the transmission of 2000 year-old lineages within the context of geographical place of origin. The many aspects of Burma, the land, people, nuns, monks, pagodas and monasteries, come together as a sacred container for the timeless teachings and their transmission. The reverberations of Pāḷi texts being chanted, as I first heard decades ago at the Mahāsi Meditation Center in Rangoon, leave a palpable feeling of Dhamma throughout the land and in particular at sacred Buddhist sites such as the Sagaing Hills of Upper Burma with its 700 monasteries and 7000 nuns and monks.

In Burmese there is a saying: ye sek soun de. It literally means 'water-drop connection' or the confluence of two streams. This expression describes the feeling that arises between people who experience a strong mutual connection, a sense of having known each other for a very long time. It is said that positive, skillful actions performed together in past lives result in friends coming together again in this lifetime. I felt this the moment I met my teacher Sayadaw U Paṇḍita. I felt the same feeling for Jake Davis when I met him as a 14-year-old student of Dhamma. We can look forward to a wealth of insightful writing from this bright light of spiritual intelligence.

Steven V. Smith
October 2003
Honolulu, Hawai'i

Introduction

Some Questions

How does a human practice change, and how can it possibly stay the same in the process of transmission between very different cultures? As one Theravāda Buddhist method of mindfulness meditation is imported from Burma to the United States, for instance, how is the practice reborn and how are Americans transformed? If people arrive at certain experiences through intesive application of mindfulness, how are their understandings presented through, and shaped by, different languages?

In considering these questions, each part of the following discussion must address some aspect of interpretation. I focus on oral and written discourses, referring to these collectively as 'texts'. Human beings interpret particular patterns of sound, marks on a page, or bodily motions, I argue, based on past and present context: their cultural heritage, their individual history, and the particular situation in which they find themselves. 'Freedom', for example, has a meaning in the context of the Buddha's teachings that is different from what is meant when

when singers of the "Star Spangled Banner" extol the "Land of the free/ and the home of the brave." Meditation teachers must use social and linguistic mechanisms to communicate with students, to offer guidance and inspiration. Thus, in analyzing the transmission of mindfulness meditation from Burma to the United States, we are examining the process of rendering various texts in the terms of different social contexts.

Such understanding and interpretation is a ubiquitous part of human activity. Academic scholars use the term 'hermeneutics' to refer to the ways of understanding that various people employ, our methods of interpretation. For examples of hermeneutical approaches to the Buddha's teachings, I draw mainly from the tradition I have practiced in for the last decade and know best, mindfulness meditation as taught by the lineage of teachers descended from the Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw (1904-1982).

Since the establishment of mindfulness, *satipaṭṭhāna*, aims at the development of 'insight', the practice is more often referred to among English speakers as *vipassanā* or Insight Meditation.[1] Almost all monks in Burma, Thailand, and Sri Laṅka practice and teach various traditions of Theravāda Buddhism, whereas the Mahāyāna schools predominate in Tibet, China, and Japan. The Mahasi Sayadaw, an influential Theravādin monk born in Burma at the turn of the last century, was responsible for gaining one particular form of mindfulness practice worldwide popularity. Practitioners such as Anagarika Munindra and Dipa Ma, through their guidance of young Americans in the 1960s and 70s, helped

---

1 Though commonly translated as 'foundations of mindfulness', *satipaṭṭhāna* refers primarily to the activity of being mindful, the presence of attention, rather than the objects of awareness. In the range of commentarial literature, two possible derivations for the latter half of the term are given: from *paṭṭhāna*, 'foundation', or alternatively from *upaṭṭhāna*, 'presence', 'attentiveness', or 'establishment'. Examining the use of these terms in the Pāḷi texts, Anālayo 2003: 29-30 demonstrates that understanding *satipaṭṭhāna* as an activity - deriving the term from *upaṭṭhāna* - is far preferable, both practically and etymolgically. Cf. Also Thanissaro 2002a: 96.

establish the Mahāsi mindfulness method as the primary practice taught at IMS.

One of the Mahāsi Sayadaw's leading teaching disciples, the Venerable Sayadaw U Paṇḍitābhivaṁsa (1921-), has played a major role in cultivating the seeds of this tradition in American soil. Many of the senior teachers from North America as well as Europe and Australia trained under U Paṇḍita in Burma and at a series of three-month-long meditation retreats that he taught in the 1980s at IMS. It was Sayadaw U Paṇḍita who proposed and then personally supervised my own term of fifteen months as a monk, immersed in the language and culture of Burma, studying Theravādin theory and the language of the Pāḷi texts, and engaging in intensive, long-term practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. This world was opened up for me in the first place by two of the American teachers who studied with U Paṇḍita, Steven Smith and Michele McDonald.

There are a number of different styles and methods of Vipassanā or Insight Meditation being taught in the United States today. In order to manage some depth of analysis, the scope of this study is limited to one particular group of teachers and practitioners. I focus on the Mahāsi tradition mainly for convience: I know it best. Since almost all of the senior American teachers and major American centers in this tradition branched out from the IMS community, and since I grew up in the immediate vicinity, with intimate experience of that community, I focus on it in particular. Nonetheless, the issues that I examine at IMS are current at other Insight Meditation communities in North America, Europe, and Australia as well, to a greater or lesser extent.

The IMS community is now at critical point in its life cycle: a new generation of teachers is taking up responsibilities and the interest of a younger generation of practitioners is awakening. For over a quarter century now, the American ideals of individualism and free-inquiry have challenged teachers at IMS

to adapt the Mahāsi tradition to a new context; therein lie the community's greatest strengths, and also its greatest weaknesses. In both respects, the way that modern teachers and practitioners relate to their heritage seems critical, for the way we relate to our past determines our direction into the future.

The term used in the Pāḷi texts for 'gratitude', *kataññutā*, literally means 'knowing what was done'.[2] Those of us alive today have access to the teachings of awakening only because of the compassionate work of individuals who deeply received and humbly transmitted this treasure generation after generation, for two-and-a-half millennia. In order to maintain a relationship of respect and reciprocity towards our source as practitioners and teachers, we must first of all know the lineage(s) through which our practices were passed down. Without these roots into our history, we risk forgetting that this generation did not invent the *Dhamma*. In spiritual teachings as in academia, citing one's sources is critical. As the "Kataññū Sutta" puts it, "A person of integrity is grateful & acknowledges the help given to him."[3]

The central aim of *Strong Roots* is to demonstrate theoretically and practically the importance of operating from a coherent teaching lineage and continually returning to it to frame new interpretations. At first glance, such an attitude may appear incompatible with the values of independence and self-reliance that many Americans hold dear. People in the West have been quite eclectic in choosing elements from various 'spiritual' traditions, and often reluctant to engage in serious scholarship of any one. To elucidate the vital role of tradition, I employ the hermeneutical theory of a critic in the Western humanist tradition, George Steiner, to show how a kind of reciprocal relationship with the source renders a translation or a transmission authentic. I extend this approach to suggest that continuity of practices between different cultural contexts is

2 Please see the reference for this etymology in note 6 to the Glossary, p.292.

3 Kataññū Sutta (A.II.33){I,61}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

made possible by an ongoing cycle of return to the tradition's framework of understanding. Therefore, even while celebrating the pioneering spirit that planted the seeds of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice in the West, I advocate a contemporary transmission of the mindfulness practice that is firmly rooted in its source. In particular, I am asking for explicit and pervasive acknowledgment of the teachers who developed and transmitted the various practices employed today, and for a sincere attempt to understand the Theravādin teachings on their own terms.

Is this discussion a religious polemic by a true believer, then, or a scholarly and scientific study of an historical phenomenon? Can anyone really have an unbiased standpoint from which to analyze social reality? Western academics have been religious in their own way about the 'knowledge project' of rational Enlightenment, an ideal that came to prominence in Eighteenth century Europe. Even disciplines based on rational logic must seriously engage foreign ways of thinking, and be willing to acknowledge and draw from other rational traditions in areas where they have surpassed the achievements of the West.[4] Unless philosophical systems descended from the Greeks and the Hebrews have some privileged claim to truth, modern scholarship should only be limited to them if no more explanatory theories for the evidence at hand are available. I explore a number of Theravādin principles that provide the basis for a pragmatic and historical approach to interpreting texts, tradition, and human experience in general. Scholars and practitioners can best deepen and refine their understanding of the Mahāsi tradition by employing this native hermeneutic, I suggest.

An anthropological study of the Burmese could not achieve much depth of understanding nor much academic credibility if

4 As Garfield 2002: 260, so aptly puts it, "Giving the Western philosophical tradition pride of place as "philosophy" while marginalizing in our departments or in our individual life all other traditions… implicates us directly in institutional racism."

the researcher had never been to Southeast Asia. Similarly, some recent scholarship addressing mindfulness meditation or the Mahāsi tradition suffers from a lack of practical experience with the technique. Far from obscuring or obstructing rigorous analysis, first-hand application of the teachings is important, if not prerequisite, for an understanding of the texts and the tradition that is 'authentic' in Steiner's sense.[5] Though I had not thought of this enterprise in terms of combining the 'heart' and the 'intellect', these were the words some friends who looked at prepublication copies of this manuscript used to describe the acknowledgements in particular. Indeed, I advocate and try to demonstrate throughout an approach that integrates theory and practice.

Layout And Language Of The Text

The study of the Buddha's teachings and the institutions that interpret and transmit them has been undertaken through the disciplines of comparative religion, history, anthropology, philology, and philosophy, among others. Scholars in modern academia, as within the Theravāda, have inherited different approaches to the subject matter and have arrived at different interpretations. Where such debates might be of particular interest to people with background in these fields, I include them in the footnotes. Likewise, the reader will find there references and vital context for citations from various sources. Short essays in the footnotes explore a number of issues that are tangential to the main line of argument, different aspects of which will prove interesting, I hope, to people with interests or background in relevant fields. For that reason, however, I caution especially

5 Please see George Steiner's definition on p.80 and also the discussion of Thanissaro Bhikkhu's "'When You Know For Yourselves': the authenticity of the Pali Suttas," on p.63.

readers with less background in the Theravāda or the Humanities not to go so far off on such tangents that understanding of the main discussion in the body of the text is sacrificed. The main argument is necessarily compact and the prose at times quite dense. *Strong Roots* is not light reading, but I have been told that it does reward the investment of time and energy required for thoughtful consideration.

Throughout this investigation I try to take care with my terms, to use words in a way that is informed by how they have been used in other contexts. Based on a critical evaluation of "Deep Transmission, and of What?," I avoid certain commonly used principles and vocabulary and select others with which to understand the transmission "From Burma and Barre." I do not believe in 'Buddhism', for example. That is, my studies have convinced me that the various teachings and practices regarded as 'Buddhism' by Burmese, Tibetans, and Americans actually display much more diversity than commonality. By using the modern concept of 'Buddhism' we may unwittingly impose our idea of commonality on the historical reality, rather than allowing anthropological evidence to suggest which teachings and practices are coherent and consistent with one another.[6] Therefore, I do not use the term 'Buddhism' to describe teaching and practice at IMS, and I caution others to examine the concept's implications before speaking of 'Buddhism' as a tradition.

Sometimes we have to make concessions. For lack of a more precise adjective and with apologies to the rest of North and South America, I use the term 'Americans' throughout to refer specifically to the people of the United States. Nonetheless, careful use of language can clear up some hurtful misunderstandings. In the Pāḷi texts, the Buddha often reinterprets certain words that were commonly used in ancient India, using them in novel and edifying ways. The term *bhikkhu*,

6 Please see the discussion "Defining the Topic," pp. 17ff.

for instance, was generally used at the time to refer to ascetic wanderers who had renounced the household life to seek spiritual gains. In the *Dhammapada*, however, the Buddha declares that even if adorned with the colorful garb of a lay person, one practicing with equipoise, a “calmed, tamed, & assured” spiritual practitioner, having set aside violence towards all beings, is truly a *brahman* (a holy person), a *samaṇa* (renunciate), a *bhikkhu*.[7] The Commentary cites this verse to demonstrate that when the Buddha uses the address ‘*bhikkhave*’ in discourse after discourse, he is speaking to all those undertaking the practice for liberation from suffering: women and men, lay and ordained. In such cases, disregarding the way Theravādin texts use their terms makes the tradition appear exclusive or discriminatory in areas where this is unwarranted.

Adopting a critical attitude towards the vocabulary we use to understand the Theravāda can enable us to employ terms from that tradition in a way that is consistent with their historical usage. For thousands of years the term *pāḷi*, for instance, has been understood by Theravādins to mean ‘text’; only within the past few hundred years has it come to refer specifically to the stylized, literary transformation of the ancient Indian language in which the Theravādin texts are preserved. Out of respect for the

7 Dhp.142{Dhp.,21}; I appreciate the precision of Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s glosses “calmed, tamed, & assured,” which is why I have used them here, but my paraphrase differs slighty in their relation to the rest of the verse as well as glosses for other words. Texts such as the commentary on the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DA.22){III,755} state that in the discourses, *bhikkhu* refers to anyone undertaking the practice, “*paṭipattisampādakapuggala*.” Apparently, the unconventional use of *bhikkhu* to refer to practitioners in general became part of the way the *suttas* were codified and recorded. This ‘Suttanta-usage’ of the term *bhikkhu* is differentiated from that employed in the Vinaya Piṭaka’s explanation of the Discipline, wherein *bhikkhu* refers solely to a fully ordained renunciate (as in Latin, male forms such as *bhikkhu* are used wherever the gender is unspecified, and thus can refer to both males and females).

traditional usage, I refer throughout this investigation to the texts of the Theravādin Tipiṭaka as 'the Pāḷi'.[8]

The transmission of a Theravādin tradition, based on the Pāḷi, from a Burmese to an American context intimately involves three different languages. With a few key exceptions, the body of the text is free of language foreign to American readers, while the footnotes include important words and excerpts in the original. Those terms from the Pāḷi that do come up repeatedly in the book are defined in the Glossary.

Languages from India include some consonants not found in English, but I hope that a little explanation here will render the Indic characters used in the text less obscure. The macrons in characters such as 'ā' simply indicate a long vowel (as in 'call'), and 'ñ' is pronounced /*ny*/, as in Spanish. Consonants spoken while breathing out, or aspirating, are differentiated in Indic languages from non-aspirated consonants. The 'Th' in 'Theravāda' is pronounced not with a /*th*/ as in 'Thoroughbred' or 'Thor', but rather with a breathy (aspirated) 't', like 'Thompson' or 'Thames'. Though a word pronounced /*tom*/, while holding one's breath, does not have a different meaning in English than /*htom*/, with a breathy 't', most consonants are aspirated in North American English. Americans often find it difficult, in fact, to learn to consistently pronounce non-aspirated consonants. Nonetheless, the distinction between some of these sounds is crucial in Indic languages; a word produced with the aspirated version of a particular consonant or the long version of a particular vowel can have an entirely different meaning without these. The Buddha's discussion of *attā* ('self') is one of the central issues in the Pāḷi texts, but in order to distinguish the word for 'self' from the word *attha* ('purpose', 'meaning'), one must take care to pronounce the aspirated 't' followed by the short 'a' in the latter term, and not in the former.

8 Please see the discussion on p.53.

Attha is distinguished again from the number *aṭṭha* ('eight'). The dots below consonants such as 'ḷ', 'ṭ', and 'ṇ' mark them as retroflexed. Pronouncing these just as one would 'l', 't', or 'n', without the retroflex, will give a general approximation, but to vocalize the actual Indic consonant, one first bends the tongue over backwards until the underside of the tip of the tongue is touching the roof of the mouth, and then one vocalizes the consonant as in English. These particular differences in pronunciation are not distinguished in English, and would not affect the meaning of an English word. The generous use of such retroflexed 't's and 'd's is a particularly charming aspect of Indian English. A little self-observation can illuminate many such interesting aspects of language usage in one's own particular time and place, and intimate the diversity possible in human language.

Though most of the Pāḷi Tipiṭaka was translated and published by the Pali Text Society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the language of those renditions can often seem stilted and outdated to modern Americans. The distinct differences between translations of a century ago and those produced more recently illustrate how the ability of any interpretation to communicate is dependent on a particular historical context. Lamenting the degradation of modern language, George Steiner writes that "where the modern scholar cites from a classic text, the quotation seems to burn a hole in his own drab page."[9] To present citations from the Pāḷi in a manner that will resonate with my own audience, to allow the Buddha to burn holes in my pages, I have relied on the work of more recent interpreters. In particular, the translations and commentaries of two American monks, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trained in Sri Laṅka and in Thailand, respectively, are most careful, cogent, and faithful to the Pāḷi. This being an examination of the process of interpretation, in the footnotes I

9 Steiner 1984: 159.

discuss some differences between various scholars' English renditions of discourses cited from the Pāḷi.

Focused Inquiry

In analyzing the transmission of these teachings, I try to emulate the methodology of the tradition itself. Since we human beings each live in our own world of experience, since none of us has an impartial, complete view, inquiry is often a more skillful approach than assertion. That is why each major unit begins with three questions, a heuristic device intended to inspire and to orient the reader's examination of the issues to be presented.

Teaching by inspiring exploration, rather than dictating dogma, is an approach repeatedly employed by the Buddha in the discourses of the Pāḷi. This approach of inquiry is balanced by a rigorous focus on one issue: suffering and the end of suffering. Though composed thousands of years ago in a very different cultural context, texts such as the "Discourse on the Sīsapā Leaves" resonate still with many modern Americans because they present striking metaphors and radical ideas in a consistent and coherent framework aimed at a singular goal.

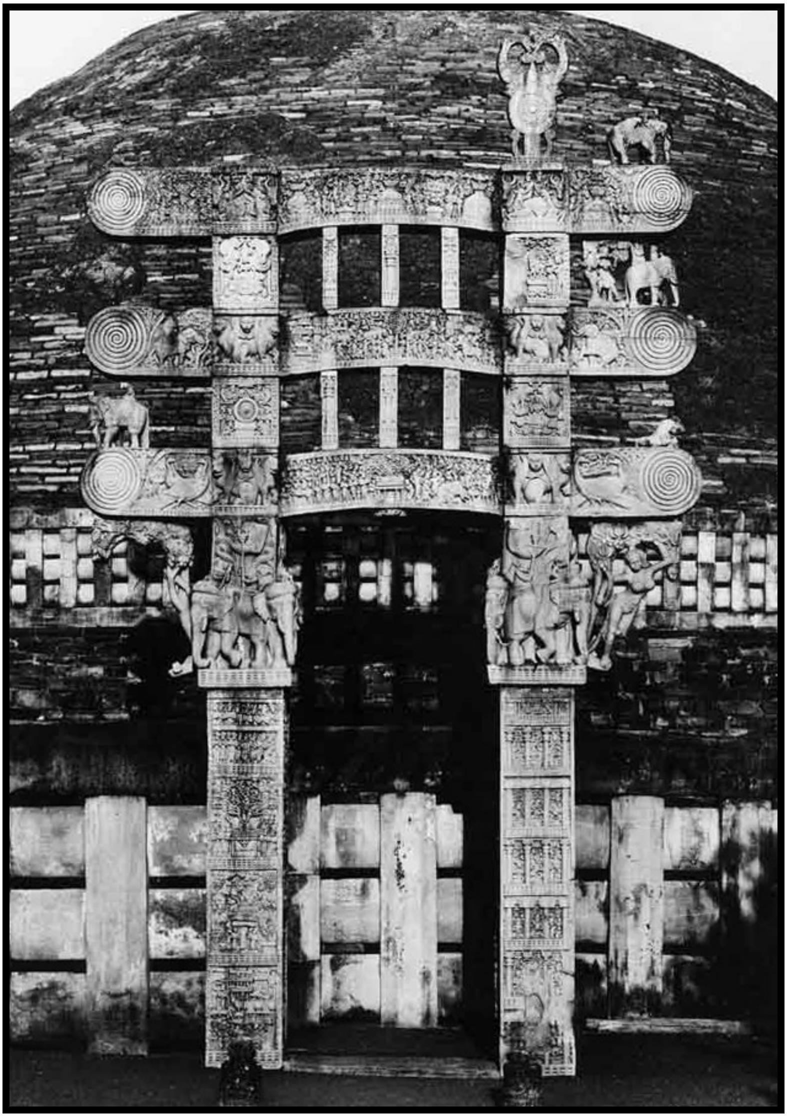
> One time the Blessed One was staying in a *sīsapā* grove in Kosambi. Then, grasping a few *sīsapā* leaves in his hand, the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus. "What do you think, bhikkhus, which are more numerous: these few *sīsapā* leaves grasped in my hand or those overhead in the *sīsapā* grove?"
>
> "Small in number, Venerable Sir, are the few leaves grasped in the Blessed One's hand, so those overhead in the *sīsapā* grove are more numerous indeed."
>
> "Just so, bhikkhus, among the things I have directly known, more numerous indeed are the ones I have not shown to you. And why, bhikkhus, are these things not shown by me? They are not connected with the goal; they are not relevant to the basic spiritual life; they do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion,

to cessation, to peace, to direct knowing, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why I have not shown them.

And what, bhikkhus, have I shown? I have shown: 'This is suffering'; I have shown: 'This is the origin of suffering'; I have shown 'This is the cessation of suffering'; I have shown: 'This is the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.' And why, bhikkhus, are these things shown by me? They are connected with the goal; they are relevant to the basic spiritual life; they do lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowing, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why I have shown them."[10]

10 Sīsapā Sutta (S.LVI.31){V,437}, author's trans. In his translation of this and other discourses Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses a gloss of "stress" for *dukkha*, which does not convey – to me, at least – many of the original's connotations, including the agony and anguish of death, loss of loved ones, etc. Therefore I have followed Bhikkhu Bodhi in using the broader and more standard translation "suffering." Indeed, throughout the discourse, I have sought emulate the accessible style of Bodhi's translation. On the other hand, Bodhi's gloss for *nibbidā*, "revulsion", connotes strong aversion, and thus seems at least potentially confusing, if not overstated, so in this case I have followed Thanissaro with "disenchantment."

Part One



East Gate of the Sañcī Stupa, Madhya Pradesh, India
(Cover image third panel from bottom on left pillar).

Deep Transmission, and of What?

What has arrived here with centers and teachers and practitioners of mindfulness meditation? How have the Buddha's teachings and the process of their transmission been understood historically? What makes a particular interpretation from one language to another, or from one person to another, authentic?

1

Defining the Topic

the process of transmission across human contexts

In order to examine this transmission from Burma to Barre, it might help to specify what exactly is being transmitted. Is it Buddhism? Many Burmese think of Buddhism as recitation of texts and elaborate ordination ceremonies and making offerings to monks. These are not central or even common activities at IMS. Some Westerners even argue for a Buddhism without beliefs or rituals. There are many definitions of 'Buddhism'; whose is the right one?

Rather than privilege an American idea of Buddhism over a Burmese one, or the Burmese over a Tibetan idea, I suggest setting this unwieldy concept 'Buddhism' aside when we want to make precise statements about doctrine or practice. Instead, I offer below working definitions of three more specific and more appropriate categories with which to examine the transmission from Burma to Barre. Within the Mahāsi tradition, I describe (1) the practice, (2) the process by which social context defines this practice, and (3) the continuity of transmission of the practice across historical contexts.

If almost everyone already uses the term 'Buddhism', though, why should we set it aside? Mainly because so many people use the term to refer to so many different things that in effect 'Buddhism' does not mean anything in particular. It is impossible

to give a precise definition without negating somebody's idea of 'Buddhism', because there is no one term or idea or activity common to every form that gets called by that name. As the astute scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith points out, concepts of 'religions' such as 'Christianity' and so on are "imprecise and liable to distort what they are asked to represent."[1]

Burmese *Nat* Spirit Shrine[2]

The modern concept of 'Buddhism' perhaps mainly misleads us. This category, as we know it, arose in Europe and only in the nineteenth century. According to Fredic Lenior, "the term... is sheer invention on the part of the first European orientalists."[3] Previous to European scholarly research of Asia, Burmese and Japanese did not think of themselves as sharing a common 'Buddhist' faith any more than ancient Indians and ancient Greeks thought of themselves as sharing a common 'Indo-European' culture. Ironically, some of the scholars most responsible for popularizing the study of 'Buddhism' stated categorically that "the early Buddhists had no such ideas as we cover with the words Buddhist and Indian."[4]

1 Smith 1978: 125.

2 Photo used with the generous permission of Tom Riddle.

3 Äccording to Lenior 1999: 187, "The word 'Buddhism' appeared from the 1820s onwards, and with it the first conceptualization of a tree with many branchings." He continues in the endnote, "Among the very first occurrences, note the work of the Frenchman Michel-Jean-Francois Ozeray, Recherches sur Buddou ou Bouddou, instituteur religieux de l'Asie orientale. (Paris: Brunot-Labbe), who cites the word 'Buddhism' in 1817. The term, which is not found in Asia, is sheer invention on the part of the first European orientalists. The spelling of the word varies considerably until the 1860s, when 'Buddhism' (in English-speaking areas) and bouddhisme (in France) were finally established. As for the Asians themselves, they speak of dharma (Sanskrit) or dhamma (Pali) to describe the teachings and the law of the Buddha."

4 "...*Ariya* does not exactly mean either. But it often comes very near to what they would have considered the best in each," Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "ariya," 77.

Burma assimilated a great many cultural forms from India along with practices descended from the Buddha, all of which blended to various degrees with native beliefs. By suffixing the word used in the Pāḷi for 'language' or 'dialect,' *bhāsā*, to 'Buddha,' 'Christ,' and 'Muslim,' the British colonial government of Burma was able to designate a citizen's 'religion'. Nonetheless, Burmese who identify themselves as 'Buddhist' see no contradiction in making offerings to nature spirits as well as to Buddhist monks; on important occasions they do both, and use the same honorific verb to describe the action.[5] At least until recently, the Chinese did not have terms equivalent to 'Confucian', 'Taoist', or 'Buddhist', precisely because "closed communities... parties with clear-cut boundaries and an *either/or* sense of adherents and outsiders" had not developed there.[6] Ralph Waldo Emerson introduced a number of ideas descended from the Buddha without his American readers suspecting them to be 'Buddhist'. People in Japan and in Afghanistan, in Indonesia and in the Americas have inherited many such teachings along with other imports and native innovations, often without distinguishing historical origins. A concept like 'Buddhism' would have been foreign to the vast majority of these people, not least because there was no discernable entity in their world corresponding to it. As Cantwell Smith puts it, they "simply did not think in such terms."[7]

5 Specifically, 'လှူ' (*hlu*), an honorific form of 'give' used only in relation to exalted recipients. Burmese words are transliterated throughout according

6 Smith 1978: 68. Cantwell Smith's is a comprehensive critique of the process

7 Smith 1978: 60: Applying Cantwell Smith's observations to the case of the Sinhala Theravāda, Carter 1977: 286, writes "Those of us who make it our business to study the Theravāda tradition which, of course, assumes the study of Theravāda Buddhists, should attempt to see the world as Theravāda Buddhits have and are viewing it. This means that we become aware that Theravāda Buddhists have only rather recently seen 'Buddhism', or looked for 'Early Buddhism'."

The way we understand the world can transform it. In *Culture and Imperialism*, the luminary literary critic Edward Said demonstrates how European and American cultural narratives not only interpreted but, in a way, produced the rest of the world as we know it. This is evident in the way Europeans studying and colonizing the Orient colluded with native interests to project, conceptually and then politically, divisions between 'Buddhism' and 'Hinduism' onto the diverse religious milieu of the Indian subcontinent. Colonial governments found that emphasizing this division enabled 'divide and conquer' methods of control. Administrative policies based on the conceptual distinction between 'Hindus' and 'Buddhists' at least exacerbated, if not created, much of the 'ethnic' tension that has resulted in such tragedies as the Sri Laṅkan civil war.

For modern Americans, 'Buddhism' is connected with various ideas, ideals, and images. The term thus has meaning for these individuals, however vague and diverse their definitions may be. However, Burmese 'Buddhist' astrology has very little in common with meditation at IMS. Richard Gombrich reports on one conference at which a panel of British historians tried to discern features shared by all the various forms of Buddhism. "They

---

In his comments on a draft of *Strong Roots*, January 2003, Khemadipa Bhikkhu pointed out that although "'Buddhism' may be a modern word, since early times, 'Buddhists' were seen as a particular sect, even if couched in looser terms, such as 'followers of the ascetic Gotama'. In medieval India (or what is presently known as 'India'), they were referred to as Bauddha, as distinct from Jaina and other established sects. The prohibition of members of a 'sect' from engaging in traditional folk practices (such as *nat* worship) and supporting the religioux from other sects seems to be a thing of Judeo-Christian-Islam. As in modern Nepal, the lines between sects in historical India probably weren't so clearly drawn, although the distinctions were there." In keeping with the principles of understanding the *Dhamma* on its own terms, we can refer to followers of particular teachings in ancient India or modern North America without employing the Western idea of exclusive religious identity implied by the term 'Buddhist' or imposing the commonality implied by the term 'Buddhism' on everything that falls under that heading.

failed to find any…"[8] No description is true of everything that everybody calls Buddhism. Therefore, we should be very cautious about making statements such as 'Buddhism is an experiential tradition'. If we assume our own particular definition of Buddhism in order to make such a statement, we implicitly dismiss as not-Buddhist some things that other people take to be part of their Buddhist practice. Often, people find such dismissals of their faith offensive, to say the least. Almost any statement about Buddhism in general is bound to be either partially inaccurate, or implicitly pejorative, or both.

Most such difficulties can be avoided simply by being more specific. The proper answer to a question like 'What is the Buddhist understanding of self?' is 'In which tradition?', or more precisely, 'In which text? As defined by whom?'. We can describe, for instance, the analysis of self given within a particular coherent tradition, such as the Theravāda or the Tibetan Mādhyamika. Of course, to give a general audience a clue as to the subject we might have to refer to 'Theravāda Buddhism', or to the 'Buddhist Pāḷi texts'. Nonetheless, with this approach we would not have to depend on the term 'Buddhism' to add any precise meaning to the sentence, which is good, because it really does not.

If the concept 'Buddhism' is neither native to the traditions it represents nor appropriate to describe many of their historical forms, what alternatives are available? English speaking practitioners often refer to the teaching and practice of *Dharma*, a term that carries many meanings including 'truth' and 'righteousness' and hence the 'doctrine' of such. Jon Kabat-Zinn

8 Gombrich 1996: 6, notes that group "reached the rather despairing conclusion that Buddhism was therefore not a useful concept at all," though Gombrich himself thinks this "to go too far." Gombrich outlines and tries to demonstrate an approach based on the logic of dependendent co-origination: recognizing the genetic relation between various traditions descended from the Buddha's teachings without trying to find an essence common to all modern forms.

lays out his approach "Toward the Mainstreaming of American Dharma Practice,"

> Although I teach Buddhist meditation, it's not with the aim of people becoming Buddhist. It's with the aim of them realizing that they're buddhas. There's a huge distinction, and so I prefer to think in terms of Dharma as opposed to terms of Buddhism per se, because it generates a lot of confusion.[9]

Some of us use the term *dhamma*, to be consistent with the Theravādin Pāḷi, rather than its Sanskrit cognate *dhṛma* (corrupted in American pronunciation as 'dhārma'). In either case, using this term alone emphasizes the philosophical, psychological aspect while discounting an aspect many Americans may be less comfortable with: in the Pāḷi discourses the Buddha frequently refers to individuals' application of *Dhamma-Vinaya*, the Doctrine and Discipline he teaches, in their own lives.[10] '*Dhamma-Vinaya*' is the first of three concepts native to the Theravāda that I suggest are crucial to an authentic understanding of the tradition. The term 'Buddhist practice' might include many different human actions and interactions. Following the Pāḷi, we can use the concept of *Dhamma-Vinaya* to refer specifically to the restraint of a person's unskillful mental and physical activity, and the cultivation of skillful mental and physical activity, for the purpose of developing insight and thus gaining total liberation from suffering. This is the practice.

Traditions Dependently Co-Arising

Another question remains, however, one that is perhaps more challenging: if the practice is a human activity, defined by language and community, can it be moved from one culture to another and still be the same thing?

9 Kabat-Zinn 1998: 479.

10 Thanissaro 1994: Introduction. E.g. Ud.V.5, fo r which please see p.32.

From the accounts of the Pāḷi, it seems that the Buddha presented an understanding of reality which asserted that things exist, or not, dependent entirely on their context. For example, an unpleasant thought or sound might arise. If we forget to be aware and present with the sensation, angry thoughts about it can proliferate, bringing with them further unpleasant effects. When mindfulness is strong, on the other hand, a screeching noise and the hearing of it can just arise and change and pass away without any identification with the process, without anyone to want the sound gone. Thus we are spared the stressful cycle of aversion to the experience and mental proliferation about it.

> There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones notices: When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.[11]

This doctrine of dependent co-arising, *paṭicca-samuppāda*, is presented in the Pāḷi as a middle way, *majjhima-paṭipadā*, between the philosophical extremes of absolutism and nihilism.[12] The Buddha applies this teaching solely as a "strategy for 'mental culture'," deconstructing the most basic human concept, that of self-identity.[13] Nonetheless, the principle that every phenomenon arises together with and dependent on related phenomena can be easily and profitably extended to describe social movements and cultural forms as well. Perhaps, then, we may be permitted to use the logic of dependent co-arising to ward off both absolutism and nihilism in social science by understanding religious traditions to be defined by historical context. From this perspective, the Buddha's teaching itself would deny the inherent, independent existence of anything such as 'Buddhism' or '*Dhamma-Vinaya*' that could be isolated from one context and inserted into, or recreated under, entirely new conditions.

---

11 Bhaya (Vera) Sutta (A.X.92){V,182}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

12 E.g. Kaccānagotta Sutta (S.XII.15){II,17}.

13 Collins 1990b: 111.

Dependent co-arising contradicts the existence of any separate or permanent aspect of experience that could be called the self, but also explains the apparent continuity of a personality. In one Theravādin text recounting a very early rendering of the Buddha's teachings for a European, the elder monk Nāgasena explains to the Greek king Menander how it can be that 'he who is reborn is neither the same nor different from the one who died'. Illustrating how there can be continuity without any permanent soul, the monk's reply includes an eloquent analogy between the continuity of a stream of consciousness and the transmission of a teaching across human contexts.

> "There is no transmigration [to future lives] but there is a connection backwards? ...How, Venerable Nāgasena? Make an analogy."
>
> "If a man were to light one oil-lamp from another, great king, would the the light have transmigrated from the first lamp? ...[Or] you know how how a child might learn a certain verse from a poetry teacher? ...Would the verse have transmigrated from the teacher?"[14]

Elsewhere, the Venerable Nāgasena gives another analogy: The mangoes that a farmer harvests are not the same pieces of fruit that he planted. Nonetheless, there is an undeniable relationship of cause and effect: even with all the requisite sun, soil, and water, without the genetic instructions from a seed, no fruit would result. Phenomena arise because of past and present conditions; present occurrences plant seeds for the future. Applying this perspective to the social realm, we can see a tradition of practice as reborn with each new set of conditions, but we can also trace the genetic continuity between forms of the practice in different contexts.

I have given a working definition for the practice of *Dhamma-Vinaya* above, and outlined its importance for understanding the transmission of the Mahāsi tradition of mindfulness meditation

---

14 Miln.V.5{71}, author's trans.

to the United States. The philosophical approach to phenomena as dependently co-arising, *paṭicca-samuppāda*, is the second concept native to the Pāḷi that I suggest as a crucial tool for understanding this transmission. From the logic of dependent co-arising, it follows that any tradition develops in relation to past and present philosophical assumptions, social interactions, and biological systems. At the most basic level, particular spoken sounds or marks on a page are significant – they signify – only to people who have developed connections between certain stimuli and certain ideas through a lifetime of socialization. This is why translation is necessary for those who have not been educated in the language of a particular text, but even speakers of the same language can read a text differently. In his treatise on language and interpretation, *After Babel*, George Steiner observes that the meaning of any particular instance of a word is "determined by the conjunction of typographical, phonetic, grammatical facts with the semantic whole."[15] Just as a word takes on meaning within a particular grammatical structure, concepts and practices take on meaning within a particular social structure. Texts, oral or written, have meaning only in context.

15 Steiner 1998: 394.

Teaching In Context

In the broadest sense, significance is conveyed by the built environment as well as by the human, by silence as well as by speech. Language, Steiner points out, is composed in large part of "what is *not* said in the saying, what is said only partially, allusively or with intent to screen."[16] The Buddha is reported to have answered with silence a number of metaphysical inquiries that he did not consider meaningful or beneficial, for instance.[17] "Genius economizes from its outset," writes Steiner, echoing the Buddha's description of skillful communication in the "Discourse on What is Heard."[18]

> I do not say, brahman, that everything that has been seen should be spoken about. Nor do I say that everything that has been seen should not be spoken about. I do not say that everything that has been heard... everything that has been sensed... everything that has been cognized should be spoken about. Nor do I say that everything that has been cognized should not be spoken about.
>
> When, for one who speaks of what has been seen... heard... sensed... cognized, unskillful mental qualities increase and skillful mental qualities decrease, then that sort of thing should not be spoken about. But when, for one who speaks of what has been seen... heard... sensed... cognized, unskillful mental qualities decrease and skillful mental qualities increase, then that sort of thing should be spoken about.[19]

Teachers of mindfulness meditation do not simply pour out the entire contents of the Pāḷi. Care must be taken to present the particular aspects of psycho-physical restraint and development appropriate to the context, those teachings that will lead to the increase of skillful qualities and decrease of unskillful ones given a particular person's values and sensitivities. In the Pāḷi discourses, the Buddha does not present a single fixed formula;

---

16 Steiner 1998: 240. The italics are Steiner's.

17 See for instance the discussion of the Ānanda Sutta p.39.

18 Steiner 1984: 16.

19 Suta Sutta (A.IV.183){II,172}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

rather his teachings vary in response to the audience. For some, the Buddha concentrates on practices of generosity and morality; for those already accomplished in these areas, he proceeds directly to intensive mindfulness practice. He uses cultivation metaphors to reach farmers and logical argument to convince philosophers. One commentary tells the story of a young woman who brings the corpse of her dead son to the Buddha, pleading for a cure. "The master, seeing her situation," tells the distraught mother to find him a mustard seed from a household that "has never before experienced any death." What the young lady finds, of course, is that every family has experienced death, that impermanence is universal, thus she 'awakens to truth'.[20] Such inventive – and apparently successful – instructions demonstrate a singular sensitivity to students' varying competencies and potentials. No rigid formulation could be an authentic rendition of such insightful teaching.

To be effective in different contexts, presentations of a teaching must vary. Language, for one, varies greatly among human beings today, and has been used in quite diverse ways over the course of history. Even as globalization increases humankind's linguistic and cultural homogeneity, the gap between generations widens. Electronic technology alone has transformed the way human beings communicate more drastically in the last century than in the previous five, since the invention of the printing press. Imagine the changes in how printed material is 'read' since St. Augustine's observation that "his teacher was the first man he knew capable of reading without moving his lips."[21]

Even at one time, particular terms can be used in various senses "from nuance to antithesis." Steiner notes how competing

---

20 'Skinny Gotami' goes on to become a nun and before long to attain full awakening; she is credited with a number of verses in the Pāḷi Tipiṭaka. Her story is detailed in the Therīgāthā-aṭṭakathā (10.1), translated by Olendzki 2002: 40-1.

21 Steiner 1978: 2.

ideologies often use the same word in opposite ways, pointing to the "fiercely disparate meanings" of concepts such as "popular will" and "freedom" in the respective Cold War era lexicons of the U.S.S.R. and the United States.[22] Such connotations also affect people's interpretations of the Pāḷi term *vimutti* as 'liberation', 'freedom', or 'release'. Likewise, there are significant – and potentially confusing – differences between the eighteenth century European ideal of rational 'Enlightenment' and the goal of *bodhi* presented in the discourses attributed to the Buddha. The term *bodhi* is used metaphorically in the Pāḷi to refer to development of the wisdom that ends suffering, but its root meaning is one of 'awakening' from sleep or from a dream.[23]

---

22 Steiner 1998: 34-35.

23 The term *bodhi* offers an instructive dilemma in Pāḷi translation. The root meaning of the term is 'awakening', as from sleep or a dream. Moreover, the popular gloss of *bodhi* as 'enlightenment' seems liable to confuse the goal of mindfulness practice with the rational kind of knowledge privileged in the European Enlightenment. Thus, I argued in a previous draft of *Strong Roots* that Thanissaro Bhikkhu's "to self-awakening" for *sambodhāya* is more a complete and accurate literal translation of the metaphor than Bhikkhu Bodhi's "to enlightenment." In a personal acommunication reviewing that draft, January 2003, Bhikkhu Bodhi offered a incisive critique, "I would contend, to the contrary, that 'enlightenment' is a more satisfactory rendering than 'awakening', for two reasons: (1) Although forms based on the root '*budh*' are used to mean 'to awaken', it is extremely rare for unprefixed forms to be used in the sense of awakening from sleep. In fact, to my knowledge, in the Pali Canon there are only a few random verses using '*budh*' to mean awaken, and they use the prefixed form *pa+budh*. In most Indian philosophical literature, '*budh*' takes on the meaning 'to know, to understand,' and in Buddhist doctrinal contexts, '*bodhi*' and '*sambodhi*' etc. signify a state of profound and complete comprehension. To my mind, 'enlightenment' conveys this meaning much more effectively than 'awakening', which suggests a first glimmer of understanding..." Indeed, reading this analysis in July 2003, Michele McDonald commented to me that one reason Western teachers use the term 'awakening' is that it sounds to students like a more achievable goal than 'enlightenment'. She, like Bodhi, prefers 'enlightenment' for conveying the full challenge and achievement of dispelling the formidable forces of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Bodhi sees his second reason as "perhaps more cogent. Though the root '*budh*' has, of course, no connection with the idea of light, when the texts describe the Buddha's attainment of sambodhi metaphorically, they consistently use

Just as there is an obvious gap to be bridged between societies removed by thousands of miles or hundreds of years, between any two individuals' accumulated experiences and lexicons there is a divide. The differences in accent and vocabulary between the Southeast and the Northeast of the United States are well known. Dialect usage of contemporary individuals native to the same city can still differ markedly across socio-economic strata and ethnic groups, as well. Deborah Tannen has described significant differences between the body language and speech habits of males and females in the United States as well as in other cultures.[24] We can sometimes notice distinct differences between the word usage of a preschooler, a teenager, and a grandmother in the same family. The connections people make with certain words vary with locale, class, age, gender, and with the particulars of any personal history. Thus the transmission of the practice, be it through an ancient manuscript or through discussion with a contemporary teacher, always involves

images of light, not images of awakening from sleep. I can think of only a few stray verses where a word play is made between *pabuddha* meaning 'awakened' and the realization of truth. But the imagery of light is ubiquitous: "*cakkhum udapādi... āloko udapādi*" etc. etc. The Buddha's function in relation to the world is not described as that of awakening others from sleep, but of shedding light and dispelling darkness. The Buddha is the light-maker, the best of lights, the light that is always shining, etc. Ignorance is commonly illustrated, not by sleep and dreams, but by darkness and gloom. *Paññā*, the factor that culminates in *sambodhi*, is also compared to light, radiance, luminosity, aura, brilliance, etc. Thus the associated metaphors and imagery support 'enlightenment' over 'awakening', which moreover suggests that ordinary experience (or the world itself) is a dream rather than a condition of darkness." Following the method of the Pāḷi, perhaps we could use the term 'awakening' to refer to the goal, especially since translators need a transitive verb corresponding to *abhisaṃbujjhati* ('awaken to'), yet use the metaphor of light and illumnation to describe the attainment. As with any interpretation, the decision rests on a careful - though never complete - understanding of what these terms connote in the original and the new context.

24 E.g. Tannen 1994.

movement between different human contexts. Steiner puts it well, "All communication 'interprets' between privacies."[25]

People use symbols to communicate between individual privacies, as between languages, by activating a web of associations.[26] Since over the course of a lifetime each individual builds up a slightly different set of memories connected with any particular symbol, translations are not universally valid but rather are most effective for a particular audience. The further from this target context, the less adequate the translation. This is obvious at the extreme, translation into a foreign tongue, but an interpretation intended for a Jewish-American lady with a Ph.D. likewise activates different, often unintended, associations for a young African-American boy. The transmission of the practice, even between two speakers of the same social context, must respond to their current experience. On intensive meditation retreat, the particular hindrances a practitioner is facing, and thus the specific instruction necessary, can change rapidly and dramatically. The selection of techniques, the particular aspects of doctrine emphasized, and those left unspoken, are unique to each teacher-student interaction.

The significance of a text, then, dependently co-arises with the audience's understanding of it: associations are only activated when symbols are presented, symbols convey meaning only by activating associations. For the practice to be actualized, people must know it well enough to make it a part of their own life. Individuals' understandings of the teachings and the teachings themselves are co-defined. That is, if there is no essence of the practice independent of how people interpret it, then we can only define *Dhamma-Vinaya* in relation to human ways of understanding, which vary between individuals, as well as between different cultures and generations.

---

25 Steiner 1998: 207.

26 Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 140.

Common Humanity

The applicability of common practices across diverse contexts suggests, however, that very similar ways of being and understanding are present even where there are apparently great cultural differences. Common ways of understanding, what Steiner calls "the shared logic of emotions," make translation possible.[27] People in very different cultures share many networks of associations. Much of the way we perceive things is shaped by the physical reality of our bodies, and human beings differ little in terms of our basic biology. The electro-chemical process by which a certain set of connections are activated in the brains of modern Americans was nearly identical in the brains of ancient Indians; we can surmise as much because this process differs little, in fact, from the nervous system of any animal. By virtue of having our only eyes on the front of our head, human beings take the path of the person ahead of them; it is no accident that both the English 'follow' and its Burmese cognate 'လိုက်' (*lai'*) can be used in relation to a 'teaching' as well as a 'leader'. Eve Sweetser demonstrates one pattern common in human language, that of "metaphorical mapping" from the physiological realm onto psychological phenomena.[28] Thus, we can 'grasp' a concept as we do an apple, 'see' a point as we do a cloud, or 'feel' bad, just as we 'feel' heat. Indo-European words for 'listen' often double for 'obey', as does the Burmese 'နားထောင်' (*na: htaun*). When the Buddha asserts in the Pāḷi that "this Doctrine and Discipline has a single taste: that of release," he does not mean that you have to lick it; that much is clear to modern Americans, just as it was, I suspect, to ancient Indians.[29] The commonalities between human beings allow us to communicate certain meanings clearly and

27 George Steiner, quoted without specific reference by Birjepatil 2001: 8.

28 Sweetser 1998. Sweetser's examination of the pattern of metaphorical mapping among Indo-European perception verbs underscores the fact that references to 'touching', 'experiencing', or 'realizing' the 'goal' of *Dhamma-Vinaya* are inherently metaphorical, rather than ontological, descriptions.

precisely, even across very different cultural and historical contexts.

Just as two very different words may have almost precisely the same meaning given their respective contexts, the same term can mean very differently, depending on how it is used. Recognizing that there is no absolute or correct definition of any word allows for a more accurate and less partisan examination of religious language.[30] Nathan Katz demonstrates that the terms '*arahat*' and '*arahant*' are effectively given different definitions in the respective Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions; thus he argues that the dispute between the two over the spiritual status of the *arahat* is a semantic difference, rather than a disagreement over the value of various teachings or practices.[31] These traditions are not fundamentally logocentric; "in Buddhism there never was a *logos* tradition; from the beginning the word has been suspect as are egocentric modes of perceiving the world."[32] According to the Western tradition defined by the Hebrews and developed by the Greeks, on the other hand, "in the beginning there was the Word." Modern American civilization is fundamentally verbal, and often we take this way of being for granted, Steiner points out. He warns us not to forget that

> There are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language, but on other communicative energies such as the icon or the musical note. And there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence. It is difficult to *speak* of these, for how should speech justly convey the shape and vitality of silence?[33]

The transcendence of language does exist in Western civilization, Steiner says; it is dubbed 'mysticism', but does not

---

29 Uposatha Sutta (Ud.V.5){Ud.,51}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "*Ayaṁ dhammavinayo ekaraso vimuttiraso.*"

30 With his deconstruction of *Religious Experience,* Proudfoot 1985 reveals the inadequacy of language used to specify similarities between the experiences of practitioners in different traditions.

31 Please see the discussion on p.87.

32 Peter Gregory, "Reflections," as cited in Maraldo 1986: 27.

33 Steiner 1984: 283.

threaten the primacy of the word in the traditions descended from the Greeks and Hebrews. Similarly, the Brahmanical tradition developed the idea that knowledge of something's name – especially in the *deva bhāsā*, the divine language of Sanskrit – gave one power over the thing itself. From this view the *tantric* traditions developed the use of *mantra*, words that are powerful merely by their recitation. The Pāḷi discourses, however, do not support the idea that words in any language could have inherent power.[34] Steiner observes that in Buddhism and Taoism, a non-conceptual type of immediate understanding is the "highest, purest reach of the contemplative act."

> Where such understanding is attained, the truth need no longer suffer the impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails. It need not conform to the naive logic and linear conception of time implicit in syntax... It is the temporal structure of language that keeps [past, present, and future] artificially distinct. That is the crucial point.[35]

The Pāḷi texts themselves point out the limited utility of words. The first of the eight conditions for the development of wisdom is living "in apprenticeship to the Teacher [the Buddha]

34 Collins 1990b: 105.

35 Steiner 1984: 283. I have omitted Steiner's suggestion that in the context of these traditions, "in ultimate truth, past, present, and future are simultaneously comprised," because it is not clear that this is true for the Theravāda. Perhaps Steiner means something similar to Ñāṇapoṇika 1998: 112, who writes that in the present moment, "parts of the past and future are, though not real, yet *actual*, in the sense of acting in the present." Commentators such as Buddhaghosa forwarded the idea of an 'ultimate reality', *paramattha*, comprised of basic elements arising together in the momentary present, *khaṇa-paccuppana.* Bodhi 2000: 137, following this standard commentarial analysis, writes that there can be cognizance of "an object belonging to any of the three periods of time – past, present, or future – or one that is independent of time (*kālavimutta*). This last expression refers to Nibbāna and concepts. Nibbāna is timeless because its intrinsic nature (*sabhāva*) is without arising, change and passing away; concepts are timeless because they are devoid of inherent nature." For the classical Theravāda, then, time is either divided or it is not present. For more on the Theravādin understanding of ultimate reality please see the discussion on p.180.

or to a respectable comrade in the holy life in whom [one] has established a strong sense of conscience, fear of blame, love, & respect."[36] The second condition is asking such teachers questions at appropriate times.

> Those venerable ones then disclose to him what has not been disclosed, clear up what is obscure, and dispel his perplexity about many perplexing points. This is the second cause and condition for obtaining the wisdom fundamental to the holy life when it has not been obtained and for bringing about the increase, maturation and fulfillment by development of the wisdom that has already been obtained.[37]

Presentations of *Dhamma-Vinaya* practice are effective precisely because of – perhaps only within – the ongoing process of transmission from teacher to student, and not as static and literal definitions of truth. Effective communication of the teachings depends on strong resonance between common aspects of humanity. Transmission can indeed happen across thousands of years, such as when a student reads a text from the Pāḷi and puts its guidance into practice, but this depends on resonance with the ancient author. At various points in practice particular texts can speak to the very issues being confronted, but rarely do students possess the self-confidence and balance of mind necessary to navigate through all the vicissitudes of the practice without any personal guidance.

Balance is critical for practice, and nearly impossible to maintain in the face of the terrifying and seductive experiences that are part of the path. This is one place where the stabilizing presence of a guide can be invaluable. To be effective, a teacher must inspire confidence where it is lacking and self-exploration where there is blind faith, create the conditions for developing concentration when appropriate and for developing energy when it is weak.

---

36 Pañña Sutta (A.VIII.2){IV,151}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

37 Pañña Sutta (A.VIII.2){IV,151}, trans. Ñāṇapoṇika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

At the beginning of practice, a teacher ascertains the experience and various strengths of the student to determine the most skillful approach towards cultivating mindfulness and concentration. Teacher and student communicate through words and other symbols, which allow both people to make the connection to similar human experiences. As more superficial layers of conceptual proliferation are attenuated in the course of intensive practice, as one navigates deeper and deeper levels of psychological conditioning, linguistic and cultural differences become less and less important. At these points, the crucial quality of teachers is the experience they have in exploring the depths of their own humanity.

During intensive practice, students' bearing and reports indicate their current state. Teachers reflect on their own experiences and guidance that helped them through particular challenges as they impart technique and try to foster balance of mind. Students who apply this guidance in their own practice with courage and commitment and deeply realize the benefit of the teachings can offer valuable advice to the next generation of practitioners. American students cherish the ability of Asian masters such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita to give this kind of knowledgeable guidance through levels of existence extremely difficult to discern or to face fully. This kind of interpretation necessarily employs the vocabulary and framework of one or more cultural traditions, but the rendition flows from the depths of the teacher's own being. Such is deep transmission.

II

Interpreting History
since the Buddha

The Buddha's teachings for liberation from suffering were radical in India twenty-five hundred years ago, as they are in twenty-first century America. One discourse relates how, just after his own awakening, the Buddha reflected on the difficulty of conveying what he had found.

> This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in attachment, is excited by attachment, enjoys attachment. For a generation delighting in attachment, excited by attachment, enjoying attachment, this/that conditionality and dependent co-arising are hard to see. This state, too, is hard to see: the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; [*Nibbāna*]. And if I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me.[1]

This discourse depicts the Buddha as gravely concerned that people be able to understand his profound teachings. If "all communication interprets between 'privacies'," the hermeneutical enterprise must have been part and parcel of the very first interactions between the Buddha and his disciples.[2]

1 Āyācana Sutta (S.VI.1){I,136}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

2 Steiner 1998: 207.

"The point of interest," writes Richard Gombrich, "is not just what the Buddha said, but what his hearers have heard."[3] The texts that were transmitted through the Theravādin tradition, the Pāḷi Tipiṭaka and its commentaries, explicitly address word usage and literal interpretation. The "Exposition of Non-Conflict" asserts that "one should not insist on local language, and one should not override normal usage," but rather opt for a middle way.[4]

> ...in different localities they call the same thing a 'dish' [*pāti*], a 'bowl' [*patta*], a 'vessel' [*vittha*], a 'saucer' [*serāva*], a 'pan' [*dhāropa*], a 'pot' [*poṇa*], or a basin [*pisīla*]. So whatever they call it in such and such a locality, without adhering [to that expression] one speaks accordingly, thinking: 'These venerable ones, its seems, are speaking with reference to this.'[5]

Thus, a speaker is to use words to signify in their native context without "firmly adhering" to a particular dialect and insisting on a particular phrasing or terminology as universal, "Only this is truth, all else is foolishness."[6] Steiner's point that 'fidelity' does not imply literal facsimile is illustrated graphically in another discourse that compares grasping the letter rather than the spirit of the teachings to grasping the wrong end of a snake.[7]

---

3 Gombrich 1991b: 21.

4 Araṇavibhanga Sutta (M.139){III,230}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

5 Araṇavibhanga Sutta (M.139){III,234}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

6 Araṇavibhanga Sutta (M.139){III,235}, author's trans.

7 Alagddūpama Sutta (M.22){I,130}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Gombrich 1996: 22-4, contends that Ariṭṭha's mistake consisted of literalism. Indeed, this agrees with the context of the simile; later in the discourse we read: "some misguided men learn the Dhamma – discourses, stanzas, expositions, verses, exclamations, sayings, birth stories, marvels, and answers to questions – but having learned the Dhamma, they do not examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom... do not gain reflective acceptance of them. Instead they learn the Dhamma only for the sake of criticizing others and for winning in debates, and they do not experience the good for which they learned the Dhamma. Those teachings, being wrongly grasped by them, conduce to their harm and suffering for a

Sometimes, it is best to say nothing at all. In one discourse the wanderer Vacchagotta approaches the Buddha and asks him,

> "How is it now, Master Gotama, is there a self?"
>
> When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.
>
> "How is it now, Master Gotama, is there no self?"
>
> A second time the Blessed One was silent.
>
> Then Vacchagotta the wanderer rose from his seat and departed.[8]

After Vacchagotta is gone, the Buddha explains to Ānanda that asserting a self would have been inconsistent with the awakened knowledge that "all phenomena are nonself." If, on the other hand, the Buddha had denied the existence of a self, "the wanderer Vacchagotta, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, 'It seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now'."[9]

The Buddha's skillful approach to instruction is apparent throughout the Pāḷi. First, he inspires people to trust and pay attention to the teacher and the teachings. Secondly, he helps students to grasp the meaning, through his careful renditions on their own terms. This enables people to apply the teachings to their own experience, the third step: gradual awakening to truth. Based on their now firm conviction in the teachings, people naturally continue to cultivate this practice, which culminates finally in a return to the inspiration for the Buddha's own teaching, full awakening. The grandfather of Pāḷi studies in modern academia, T.W. Rhys Davids, noted more than a century ago how in the texts the Buddha consistently employs a sympathetic hermeneutic in teaching.

> Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner. He attacks none of his cherished convictions. He accepts as the starting-point of his own exposition the desirability of the act or condition prized by his opponent – of the union with God (as in the *Tevijja*), or of sacrifice (as in the

---

long time."

8 Ānanda Sutta (S.XLIV.10){IV,400}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

9 Ānanda Sutta (S.XLIV.10){IV,400}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

> *Kūṭadanta*), or social rank (as in the *Mahāli*), or of the soul theory (as in the *Poṭṭapāda*). He even adopts the very phraseology of his questioner. And then, partly by putting a new and (from the Buddhist point of view) a higher meaning into the words; partly by an appeal to such ethical conceptions as are common ground between them; he gradually leads his opponent up to his conclusion. This is, of course, always Arahatship [full awakening]...[10]

The Buddha's social context demanded careful consideration of discourse and understanding. The centuries leading up to the beginning of the Common Era saw multiple waves of Āryan migration into the Ganges plain and a complex process of assimilation with the previous inhabitants. The resulting milieu included diverse and disparate philosophical, religious, cultural, and linguistic influences. The Buddha was teaching in a multicultural society comparable to the United States today, with very different cultural groups speaking many languages in close proximity. Since the traditional accounts tell of the Buddha teaching among a number of different linguistic groups such as the Kāsīs, Kosalas, Vrjis and Vatsas, Lancaster surmises that "this wandering teacher made his own translations as he moved among a heterogeneous audience."[11]

The words used and the philosophical assumptions made in teaching necessarily varied with the context. As diverse as the presentations in the Pāḷi discourses are, a full record of the Buddha's teaching would likely reveal an even greater flexibility in style, since "it is logical to expect that the tradition leveled out many of the inconsistencies of expression," as Richard Gombrich points out.[12]

10 T. W. Rhys-Davids, "Introduction to the Kassapa-Sīhanāda Sutta" (1899: 206-7) quoted in Gombrich 1996: 17.

11 Lancaster 1994: 425.

12 Gombrich 1996: 19.

Passing Baskets Along

> And the Venerable Sariputta addressed the monks... friends, this Dhamma has been well proclaimed by the Lord, the fully enlightened One. And so we should all recite it together, without disagreement, so that this holy life may be enduring and established for a long time, thus to be for the welfare and happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of devas [spirit beings] and humans.[13]

The discourses and verses of the Buddha and his disciples were memorized and transmitted orally for hundreds of years after his death and *parinibbāna*, the final break-up of his mind-body process. Often the texts were memorized in isolated areas, and sometimes in different dialects. Commentarial texts and inscriptions from the second century B.C.E. mention schools of *bhāṇakas*, reciters, each taking responsibility for the oral transmission and preservation of a particular division of the discourses. "For some time after the *parinibbāna* of Sakyamuni Buddha, the sound was 'text', and the spoken word became the handed-down property of custodial *bhāṇakas*."[14] Recitation from memory in groups served to guard against the possibility of an individual altering the texts, whereas the later copying of the texts to palm leaf was likely a solitary affair, leaving the mistakes of the scribe unchecked. "The technical mnemonic methods of oral transmission have sometimes been so highly developed as to render the oral text more reliable than the manuscript tradition,"

---

13 Saṅgīti Sutta (D.33){III,211}, trans. Maurice Walshe.

14 B. C. Law, *A History of Pali Literature*, (Varanasi: Bhartiya, 1933), Vol. I., as quoted in Hoffman 1992: 197-8, points to evidence of references to the Five Nikāyas by the second century B.C.E. in Asokan inscriptions, and to the Milindhapañha's list of *Dīghabhāṇaka* (Reciters of the Long Discourses), the *Majjhimabhāṇaka* (...of the Middle Length Discourses), the *Saṁyuttabhāṇaka* (...the Connected Discourses), and the *Anguttarabhāṇaka* (...the Further-factored Discourses), and the *Khuddakabhāṇaka* (...the Small Books), though the last remained open to additions at that point.

writes William Graham.[15] In the climate of north India at the time of the Buddha, the materials used for writing – leaves, bark, and the like – decomposed quickly and writing was used almost exclusively for calculations.[16] To modern sensibilities, oral transmission seems fallible and prone to corruption, but the early followers of the Buddha apparently considered the teachings too valuable to entrust to scripture. As in other places,

> at first writing was perceived as simply a mnemonic device, to facilitate or to ensure that the oral rendering be accurate. The oral form was clearly primary, and for many centuries it had been unsupplemented.[17]

The oral transmission of the texts has had a major impact on how they have been understood and interpreted. Steve Collins has demonstrated how even after the Pāḷi was written down just before the beginning of the Common Era, Theravādin texts continued to be "recited and listened to; in Buddhism as in pre-modern Europe silent reading was the exception rather than the rule."[18] The modern Theravāda exhibits a similar emphasis on oral transmission. In the Mahāsi tradition, meditators on intensive retreat listen to an hour-long 'dhamma talk' each day, for instance; this practice continues at IMS. Another interesting example came to light when a famous twentieth century Pāḷi scholar of Burma, the Mahāgandayone Sayadaw U Janakābhivaṁsa, suggested that students taking the government-administrated Pāḷi exams be allowed to refer to written texts as in Western institutions of higher learning, rather than relying entirely on rote memorization and recitation. More conservative

15 William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), as quoted in Hoffman 1992: 203.

16 I am indebted here to a presentation by Andrew Olendzki at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, of which he is Executive Director, December 2001.

17 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, discussing the pre-Islamic Avesta, "Scripture as Form and Concept," in *Rethinking Scripture*, ed. Miriam Levering, 29-57 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), as quoted in Hoffman 1992: 199.

18 Collins 1992: 130.

monks rejected the proposal on the grounds that it would break with the 2500 year-old tradition of oral transmission through memorization, echoing a sentiment found in classical Theravādin texts, "Knowledge in books [is like] money in someone else's hand: when you need it, it's not there."[19]

The oral nature of transmission in the Buddha's time shaped the modern Theravāda in another way, as well. Even in the Pāḷi discourses the Venerable Sariputta is seen developing various mnemonic lists of *dhamma* subjects, which are then "confirmed" by the Buddha.[20] Such lists, referred to as *mātikā*, developed into comprehensive systemizations of the concepts contained in the discourses, and came to be called the *Abhidhamma*, the texts of 'Further Doctrine' or 'Concerning the Doctrine'. The Venerable Rewata Dhamma and Bhikkhu Bodhi note that the tradition ascribes to the Venerable Sariputta "the textual order of the Abhidhamma treatise as well as the numerical series" in one of the texts, the *Paṭṭhāna*.

> Perhaps we should see in these admissions of the [Theravādin Commentary] the *Atthasālinī* an implicit acknowledgement that while the philosophical vision of the Abhidhamma and its basic architecture originate from the Buddha, the actual working out of the details, and perhaps even the prototypes of the texts themselves, are to be ascribed to the illustrious Chief Disciple and his entourage of students.[21]

In this same commentary, Buddhaghosa points out that with unskillful use of the Abhidhamma, the mind runs off pondering the imponderables, thus resulting in mental derangement.[22] In the Burmese tradition of the Mahāsi Sayadaw, the Abhidhamma

---

19 The debate around the Pāḷi exams was relayed to me by my Pāḷi teacher at the Paṇḍitārāma Sāsana Yeiktha, U Khemika, who studied at the Mahāgandayone. The verse is quoted from Collins 1992: 130, "(Dhn 364 = Lkn 13), freely translated."

20 E.g. Sangīti Sutta (D.33){II}, trans. Maurice Walshe.

21 Bodhi 2000: 10-11.

22 Atthasālinī, ed. E. Müller (London: Pali Text Society, 1897), 24: "*abhidhamme duppaṭipanno dhammacittam atidhāvanto acinteyyāni pi cinteti, tato cittavikkhepaṁ pāpuṇāti.*"

analyses are used to interpret individuals' experience in meditation practice as well as to understand teachings given in the Pāḷi discourses. At least one early school, the Sautrantikas, did not accept the Abhidhamma formulations as authoritative, and "it is in this section of the *Tripiṭaka* that there is the greatest discrepancy between the versions of the various schools."[23]

The more conservative factions of the early followers of the Buddha adopted strict standards for considering a text as authoritative: it must have been either spoken by the historical Buddha, specifically authorized by him, or spoken by a disciple he had authorized. Significantly, the list of authoritative texts was finite; at least theoretically, the canon closed with the death of the last disciple the Buddha had personally authorized. Using the analogy of earth passed in baskets along a line of construction workers, texts passed orally along a lineage of teachers came to be grouped into various *piṭaka*, baskets.[24] Most of the early schools recognized an authoritative *Tipiṭaka* or *Tripiṭaka* composed of 'three baskets' of texts, though specific contents varied somewhat between schools. The various *Tipiṭikas* each consisted of a *Vinaya Piṭaka* of discipline, a *Sutta Piṭaka* of discourses, and an *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, containing sophisticated analyses of psycho-physical phenomena and the process of liberation. Traditional accounts of communal recitations, *saṅgīti* or *saṅghāyanā*, held to fix the teachings after the Buddha's death later served as a rhetorical justification for discounting more recently introduced texts and interpretations.

The first major debate over the interpretation of particular disciplinary rules is documented as being resolved by vote at

---

23 Warder 2000: 7-8, "The third section or tradition of the *Tripiṭaka* is the *Abhidharma*, which term meant originally 'concerning the doctrine' and afterwards was used for a systemic study of the doctrine." This gloss of *abhidhamma* would indeed follow from the basic meaning of the Indo-European root **abhi*, which developed elsewhere into the English preposition 'upon' as well as the cognate Latin preposition 'epi-', according to Roy Wright.

24 B. C. Law, *A History of Pali Literature*, quoted in Hoffman 1992: 197.

gathering of renunciates in the town of Vesālī around 386 B.C.E, only a hundred years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*. An assembly held some thirty-seven years later in Pāṭaliputta marked the first large-scale division between different factions of the followers of the Buddha over doctrine. The grounds for disagreement centered on the qualities of one fully awakened, an *arahat* (Sanskrit *arahant*). First and foremost was the question of whether lust could arise in an *arahat* while dreaming. Other points were debated, including questions regarding the extent of an *arahat*'s knowledge and "whether one may enter the Way as the result of spoken words." Nonetheless, "the two parties were less far apart than at first sight they appear to be, except on the first ground," according to comparative textual studies by a distinguished scholar of Indian history, A. K. Warder. The majority faction at Pāṭaliputta, which was thus called the 'great assembly', the *Mahāsaṅgha*, maintained that since actions in dreams were involuntary, they could not serve as indications of mental purity. A minority held that the mind-stream of an *arahat* was completely and permanently purified of the defilements, including lust, even during sleep. This was the understanding supported by many of the most senior monks, apparently, and thus came to be called the *Sthaviravāda*, 'the doctrine of the elders'.[25]

Unresolved doctrinal disagreements between the two groups at the Pāṭaliputta assembly led to separate traditions with very different conceptions of the historicity of the Buddha and his teachings. Maintaining a definition of *arahat* as one completely pure of unskillful intentions, the Pāḷi texts depict the Buddha's own awakening to be the same in nature as that of any *arahat*, though distinguished, of course, by being the first. The *Sthaviravāda* generally held to this position, though "gradually they attributed a higher status to the Buddha, eventually complete 'omniscience' (*sarvajñatā*), especially in their more

25 Warder 2000: 211-2.

popular propaganda." Although its Sanskrit name is cognate with the Pāḷi *Theravāda*, the modern school by that name is one of a number of traditions that descended from the early *Sthaviravāda*. Yet we can still see in the modern Theravāda reflections of this basic principal of the Buddha as an *arahat*, and also the tendency to elevate him to omniscience.

Those who took the opposing side at the Pāṭaliputta assembly, defining an *arahat* as less than completely purified, held the Buddha to have a qualitatively different type of realization. The Mahāsaṅgha took the Buddha to be "far above other human beings or perhaps not really a human being at all." According to Warder,

> They thus began that transformation of the Buddha, and his doctrine, which led step by step to the Mahāyāna, from the humanism of the original *Tripiṭaka* to the supernaturalism of most of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*.[26]

While the "doctrinal widening" of the Mahāyāna eventually did include this key change in the Buddha's status, according Paul Williams it is incorrect to identify the split between the *Sthaviravāda* and the *Mahāsaṅgha* as the inception of the Mahāyāna movement. Instead, he argues that the movement had its roots in a number of different groups formed for the veneration of particular texts that became popular after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*.[27] Certain elements of some of these texts may in fact have developed from teachings of the historical Buddha, possibly omitted from the canons of the more conservative schools.[28] Williams, however, writes of

26 Warder 2000: 211-2, refers to the claim of the Buddha's omniscience in the Sabbaññutañāṇaniddeso (Paṭis.I.1.72-3){I,131ff}.

27 Williams 2001: 22ff. Nonetheless, "the available evidence shows that the majority of Buddhists in India at all times have followed the early schools and the Mahāyāna there was always a minority movement: it is only in certain countries outside India (China and Tibet and the countries which derived their Buddhism from them) that the Mahāyāna completely supplanted the earlier Buddhism," Warder 2000: 356.

28 Warder 2000: 198-9, points to statements in the Pāḷi itself that certain texts were added after the first *Saṅgāyana*. He points as well to the interesting

> a tradition found in the Mahāyāna *sūtras* themselves which would associate the origins of these texts not with the historical Buddha who died, perhaps, in 483 or 370 B.C.E., but rather with visionary experience and inspiration by one of a number of Buddhas who continue to exist on a higher plane, in their Buddha Fields or Pure Lands.[29]

Later Mahāyāna schools developed an explicitly a-historical approach, further distancing their hermeneutic principles from those of non-Mahāyāna schools; East Asian interpretations of the Lotus Sutra, for instance, posit the existence of a Buddha-essence from which revelations of teachings could come at any point in human history. Many of these innovative teachings contained specific claims of superiority to the discourses already established. Often these texts were self-styled as the only authoritative rendering, so that adherents necessarily interpreted the entire corpus of established texts in light of their chosen one. Indeed, the name this movement adopted for itself as a whole, *Mahāyāna*, or 'Great Vehicle', was and is a polemic device implying superiority over the traditions that did not adopt its innovations; these latter are referred to in Mahāyāna texts – and in certain academic literature – as the *Hīnayāna*, the 'Lesser Vehicle'.[30] Over the course of historical development in North

---

account given in the *Vinaya* texts of Purāṇa, a monk who was journeying in the south at the time of the recital. On his return, the elders invited him to accept the Dhamma and Vinaya as they had been recited. Purāṇa politely replies that the Dhamma and Vinaya have been well recited by the elders, but that he will just continue to remember the teachings the way he heard them directly from the Master. Warder notes that "If there were a number of monks in distant parts who missed the First Rehearsal it is likely enough that quite a number of discourses remembered by them and handed down to their pupils existed, which were missed at the Rehearsal though perfectly authentic. Under these conditions it would seem perfectly reasonable to incorporate such discourses in the *Tripiṭaka* later, despite the risk of accepting unauthentic texts. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*... makes the Buddha lay down a rule to cover just this situation," for which see note 12 on p.283.

29 Williams 2001: 29.

30 Warder 2000: 340-1, on the recurring Mahāyāna "denunciation of the 'inferior' (*hīna*) way of the pupils... contrasting rather unpleasantly with the

Asia many different texts containing disparate doctrines were incorporated into the Mahāyāna canon, so that schools such as the Yogacāra, the Prajñaparamita, and the Pure Land defined themselves and the 'authoritative' teaching of the Buddha very differently depending on the particular text to which they adhered. As Harold Coward points out, "the crucial role of scripture in Buddhist self-definition becomes even more evident when the split between the *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhists is examined."[31]

A 'Cumulative Tradition'

Asoka Moriya, emperor of the first pan-Indian state, was a great patron of the early community of monks and nuns, and seems to have been especially "closely associated with Sthaviravāda school."[32] Through his efforts during the third century B.C.E., the Buddha's teachings were interpreted for people all over India: north to modern-day Afghanistan; west throughout much of the former Persian Empire; and south as far as the island of (Sri) Laṅka. Theravādin historical chronicles note as well a mission east to *Suvaṇṇabhūmi*, the 'Golden Land'. This Mōn country in what is now southern Burma and Thailand "very likely was... the first" area in South-East Asia to receive teachings descended from the Buddha, but the earliest firm archeological evidence is a set gold plates inscribed with Pāḷi text from the fifth century C.E.[33]

The modern Burmese tradition, however, descends primarily another of the Asokan missions: beginning about a decade after

tolerance and understanding characteristic of most earlier Buddhist texts."

31 Coward 1992: 141.

32 Warder 2000: 263, following Bareau, 1955, *Les premier conciles bouddhiques* (Paris).

33 Warder 2000: 331-2, following Coedès, 1948, *Les États Hindouisés et d'Indonésie*, Histoire du Monde VIII. 2 (Paris: Boccard): 108.

about a decade after Asoka came to power, his son Mahinda and his daughter Saṅghamittā, both ordained renunciates, led entourages south to the island of Laṅka, where they established communities of both nuns and monks, as well as a tradition of *Dhamma* study and practice. The first of these set out from the 'Hill of the Shrine' now known as Sañcī, the same monument whose eastern gate is adorned with the relief featured on the cover of *Strong Roots*. Both Saṅghamittā and Mahinda had been born nearby, in their mother's native town of Vedisa.[34] It is significant, especially in examining the roots of the Mahāsi tradition, that the missions to Laṅka were launched from "the heart of the region where the Sthaviravada is known to have had its greatest strength in this period."[35]

Burma and Ceylon have had a long history of missions in both directions, various lineages being (re)introduced from abroad when one had died out or lost the support of the ruler. King Anawratha of Pagan (1044-77 C.E.) imported texts and teachers from the Mōn capital, and established this Theravādin lineage among the Burmese. This king, at the request of his Ceylonese counterpart, sent a mission in 1070 to the island to help revive the tradition there. About a century later, a Mon monk named Uttarajiva and his pupil Chapata traveled to Ceylon and on their return established a movement to reform the Burmese Saṅgha in accord with the "abhidhammic orthodoxy of Buddhaghosa that characterizes the Sinhala Theravada."[36] Over time, this Sinhala influenced faction came to dominate the Burmese religious establishment.[37]

---

34 Malasekera 1974: vol. two, *s.v.* "Mahinda Thera," 583; "Saṅghamittā Therī," 990; "Vedisa," 922.

35 Warder 2000: 256.

36 Mendelson 1975: 38; Swearer 1987.

37 The early history of the *Buddha-Sāsana* in Burma is not well established. Eliot 1962: Vol. III, 51, reports early "Hīnayāna" inscriptions found in Prome. Heinz Bechert notes the assimilation by the Pyu and Arakanese civilizations of Sarvāstivāda, Mahāyāna and Tantric teachings, Bechert 1991: 147.

Thus the tradition in which the Mahāsi Sayadaw trained descends primarily from the Asokan transmission to Laṅka, in particular the conservative school of the Mahāvihāra (established 256 B.C.E at Anuradhapura), which emphasized "an historicist and exclusivist idea of its 'Canon', 'the Buddha's Word(s)'."[38] Steve Collins argues convincingly that the later threat of Mahāyānist innovation and expansion in Laṅka was proximate cause for the

---

Bechert describes a mixture of indigenous and Indian beliefs present in the Mōn civilization of Drāvati in Lower Myanmar, where art and culture flourished from the sixth to the tenth centuries C.E. The Mōns traced their Theravādin lineage to the Asokan missionaries Soṇa and Uttara. When Anawratha came to the throne of Pagan, he attempted to import some aspects of the glorious Mōn culture. After his "conversion" by the Mōn monk Shin Arahan, Anawratha conquered Thaton, the capital of the Mōn kingdom, in 1057 C.E. and brought back many skilled craftsmen along with Theravādin scriptures and relics, according to Burmese chronicles. The importation of Mōn Theravāda was perhaps the most crucial turning point in the history of the *Buddha-Sāsana* in Burma. Having consolidated his control over most of lowland Burma, Anawratha embarked on an ambitious campaign to purify the Saṅgha according to Theravādin orthodoxy, as defined by the Mōn monk Shin Arahan. Mendelson, *Saṅgha and State*, 38, cites Gordon Luce's contention that it was in fact Kyanzitta (1084-1113 C.E.) and not Anawratha who finally suppressed the Tantric Buddhism present in Pagan and imposed Theravāda. In any case, popular belief held up Anawratha as the model for later Burmese *dhammarājā*, 'righteous kings'. For the past millennium up through the present, with the exception of the period of British control, "almost every ruler" in Upper and Lower Burma attempted political legitimacy through the protection, propagation, and purification of the "orthodox" Saṅgha, writes Than 1993: 15.

As a result of continued royal patronage, the Theravāda has played a dominant role in the development of modern Burmese society. Consequently, the popular understanding of Buddhist history in Myanmar dismisses most of the philosophical schools present before Anawratha's purification. Mendelson 1975: 31, writes that in fact "the Burmese view of history is a monastic view of events." He disputes, 35, the popular conception of a "unified, unchanging" Burmese Theravādin tradition from the time of Anawratha. Historically, Burmese lay people have continued to provide refuge and sustenance for factions suppressed by the prevailing authorities, according to Ferguson 1978: 69. Thus, when Anawratha imposed Theravāda as the state religion, Sarvāstivāda, Mahāyāna, Tantric and other suppressed cults were merely driven underground or out beyond the limits of the king's control. Than 1993: 15, notes that in the fifteenth century, the Mōn

systemization of the Theravādin tradition as we know it. The monks who first committed the Pāḷi Tipiṭaka to writing just before the Common Era lived and worked five hundred years before the interpreters who collated and authored the classical commentaries, such as Buddhaghosa; nonetheless, both the transcribers and the commentators were working at the same institution, the Mahāvihāra, and both were consciously defining an 'orthodox' tradition in opposition to Mahāyāna innovations.[39] The tradition thus developed at the Mahāvihāra defined itself as the 'Doctrine of the Elders', the *Theravāda*. As the name implies, this tradition has continued to use the hermeneutical principle of conservative orthodoxy to define itself and its canon.

---

king Dhammaceti forced all monks in his kingdom to re-ordain in the lineage of the Sinhalese Mahāvihāra. While some factions were impressed with the reputed orthodoxy of the Sinhala Saṅgha, "available evidence shows that there long remained refractory elements" opposed to the "Sinhalization" of the Burmese Saṅgha, according to Mendelson, 52. He notes, 51, that monks who had ordained in Burma were especially opposed to re-ordination as it effectively gave the monks who had studied and ordained in Laṅka seniority over all others, regardless of previous standing.

38 Collins 1990a: 127-38.

39 Collins 1990a: 127-38. The Pāḷi Tipiṭaka of the Mahāvihārins was committed to writing for the first time during the reign of the Laṅkan king Vaṭṭagāmaṇi (29-17 B.C.E.), who, not incidentally, supported a rival group, the Abhayagiri, which had been expelled by the Mahāvihārins in 28 B.C.E., and subsequently "proved to be less conservative and orthodox, receptive to the ideas of the Mahāyāna and thus diverging in doctrine from the Sthaviravāda," according to Warder 2000: 306-7. We should note, however, following Warder, that the a military invasion had occurred shortly before simultaneous with a famine. This left one text remembered on Laṅka by a single monk, and surely helped convince the Mahāvihārins to commit their Tipiṭaka to palm leaves. Nonetheless, the schism of the Mahāyānist Abhayagiri sealed the decision. While the monks of the Mahāvihāra retired to the "Āloka Vihāra, far from the dissensions of the capital," to inscribe the *Tipiṭaka* on palm leaves around 20 B.C.E., they were nonetheless working as part of the community and institution from which they came, and to which their work was returned. Likewise, Buddhaghosa translated and authored commentaries at the Mahāvihāra during the reign of the king Mahānāma (409-431 C.E.), who also favored the Abhayagiri. Warder, 278, notes that another school, that of the Jetavana, had broken away around 300 C.E.



Monastery Complex at Anuradhapura, Sri Laṅka
(trough at back left used to gather daily food donations for the Saṅgha).

Having defined an orthodox body of texts, with most of its discourses addressed to renunciates of the Buddha's day, Theravādin monks in South and Southeast Asia faced the challenge of rendering their tradition meaningful to the lay people on whom they depended for support and social legitimation. To make the teachings accessible and applicable in a lay social context, Theravādins increasingly portrayed the practice as a "gradual path." Two major commentarial works on Theravādin hermeneutics characterize the teachings by citing a verse from the *Majjhima Nikāya*, "Bhikkhus, I shall teach you a *dhamma* that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end..."[40] Thus, generous giving and purity of conduct, perhaps more achievable than intensive meditation practice in the eyes of people supporting households, have been emphasized as necessary and valuable parts of the path to the final goal of awakening.

40 Chachakka Sutta (M.148:2). Having said that he will teach the Dhamma which is good in the beginning, middle, and end, the Buddha prescribes the "true knowledge" which leads to dispassion and liberation.

Theravādin hermeneutics enabled teachers to relate the traditional texts to the human context of their historical moments. According to the traditional account, the very first teachings given on the island of Laṅka, by Asoka's son Mahinda, were presented in the local language. The accounts of the Buddha's own teachings, however, continued to be memorized orally in a north Indian dialect. Though various translations and commentaries were later written in Sinhala, these became difficult to decipher within a few hundred years of their composition as the living language developed. On the other hand, monks continued to study the canonical texts in their original north Indian dialect, which came to be called the 'language (*bhāsā*) of the texts (*pāḷi*)'.[41] Scholars began to use the word '*pāḷi*' as the name of a language, perhaps through a misunderstanding of the syntax involved in the compound '*pāḷi-bhāsā*', probably sometime during the nineteenth century. In any case, by the time of Buddhaghosa, an extremely influential Theravadin commentator of the fifth century C.E., the 'language of the texts' was long since a dead one. Perhaps due to his upbringing as an educated Brahman in northern India, Buddhaghosa favored this classical language and set the precedent for the next millennium by writing his extensive commentarial works in it.[42]

41 According to Warder 2000: 284, the *Sthaviravādin* texts were recorded in "a west Indian language, apparently that of Avanti when the school had its main centre in that country." The term '*pāḷi*' first meant "a line, bridge or causeway, and thence a 'text'," according to Collins 1990a: 91. "It is often found in opposition to *aṭṭhakathā*, which is usually translated 'commentary', and so some scholars have take *pāḷi* to mean 'canon'." As Collins points out, "...the primary use of the distinction between *pāḷi* and *aṭṭhakathā* is not to classify documents into different categories (although it did come to have that function: e.g. Sp 549, Sv 581), and still less to denote explicitly a closed list of texts, as the terms 'canon' and 'commentary' might imply; rather it was to distinguish between the precise wording of a text, in the text-critical sense, and the more flexible task of 'saying what it means', which is the literal translation of *aṭṭhakathā*." My experience is that Burmese monks tend to use the term '*pāḷi*' to mean 'text' in the inclusivist sense Collins points to.

42 Gombrich 1991b: 148-153.

The development of 'Pāḷi' as an international *lingua sacra* has allowed scholars from all over South and Southeast Asia to participate in Theravādin discourse, but it has also had the effect of excluding those who were not educated in the classical language. It is true that "for the common people at large such texts and knowledge have a referential and legitimating function, even if they themselves have no direct access to them."[43] Nonetheless, throughout the history of the Theravāda, most lay people have been familiar only with the small section of the texts presented to them in talks by monks, mainly appealing stories rather than meditation instructions.[44] Authentic transmission of the Pāḷi, for most modern Theravādins in Asia, is not primarily a function of applying the texts' guidance in this very life to realize full liberation from suffering; rather, many Burmese monks emphasize the importance of verbatim reproduction of the *Tipiṭaka* texts and their orthodox interpretation according to commentators such as Buddhaghosa. In Burma, scriptural orthodoxy has been the ideal and the self-definition of the Theravāda over the past thousand years.[45]

The Theravāda's longstanding and dominant "historicist" approach to its texts sets this tradition apart from most other groups classified as 'Buddhist'. Beginning in the early centuries C.E., a great number of chronicles, *vaṁsa*, were composed on Laṅkan history as well as that of the Buddha and his teachings. The Theravādin approach was not identical with modern Western historicity, however: the *vaṁsa* genre emphasizes genetic continuity, detailing particular lineages and allowing "only one

43 Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 3-4, quoted in Collins 1990b: 17.

44 Gombrich 1991b: 153-7, notes especially the case of Sri Laṅka, but modern practices and archaeological evidence would suggest that in Southeast Asia, as well, monks have long relied on *Jātaka* stories and other similar material in their presentations of *Dhamma-Vinaya* for lay audiences.

45 E.g. King 1976: 81, "Burmese Buddhism might be defined as a thousand-year-long attempt to be literally and scrupulously faithful in thought, word, and deed to the world-view and way of religious practice set forth in the Pāḷi canon as the verbatim words of the historical (Gautama) Buddha."

legitimate successor at time." In describing the transmission of practice beginning with the Buddha, this particular historical approach confined legitimacy and authority to a single lineage of teachers. Collins sees the writing down and cataloging of the Pāḷi Tipiṭaka, the development of an historical account of its transmission, and the systemization of doctrine and interpretation strategies in the Commentaries as "connected parts of a strategy of self-definition and self-legitimation" by the Theravāda. Here Collins cites Heinz Bechert's point that the *vaṁsa* represent the only "historical literature in the strict sense of the word [in South Asia] prior to the period of the Muslim invasions." This reference recalls Cantwell Smith's observation that the Muslim invasion also predicated the first 'Hindu' self-consciousness, demonstrating once again the intimate tie between conceptions of history and the definition of a group's identity.[46]

Hermeneutics and historicity are inextricably bound; the various assumptions about history made by researchers determine how they interpret oral and written discourse of the present as well as the past. Approaches taken by academic scholars of Asian religions have greatly impacted the living traditions themselves. Until the term 'Buddhism' gained currency in the nineteenth century, few if any Burmese thought of themselves as engaged in a common cause with the Japanese or the Tibetans; most Burmese still do not. Zen, Theravāda, and Vajrayāna have each evolved over thousands of years, but the tradition of picking a few elements out of these respective contexts and merging them together – conceptually or practically – is a modern one. In a very real way, Buddhism and modern

46 Collins 1990a: 99-101. According to Collins, an alternate, and perhaps more basic, meaning of *va.msa* is 'bamboo', a plant which reproduces by sending out a single shoot; the Indic *vaṁsa* genre was primarily used to chronicle lineages of succession, and thus was well suited to rhetorical use by the monks of the Mahāvihāra. "A particular characteristic of the development of the Mahāvihārin tradition is its rich and varied collection" of *vaṁsa*. Smith 1978: 64.

Western conceptions of it arose together, dependent on one another.

One of the first major Western studies was undertaken by the scholars of the Pali Text Society (PTS) in the later part of the nineteenth century, who attempted to unearth the original "early Buddhism" from the layers of Theravādin tradition.[47] T.W. Rhys Davids and his associates at the PTS have been indicted by modern scholars for establishing an approach that "essentialized Buddhism in terms of its 'pristine teachings'."[48] Influenced by the approach of the PTS, a number of modern analyses, including notably Melford Spiro's studies of Burma, have tried to distinguish the 'Great Tradition' of Buddhism, as represented in the Pāḷi texts, from the 'later accretions' to popular Buddhism, the 'little traditions' of ritual and 'folk superstitions'.[49] Significantly, the English and German scholars who established

47 Bond 1982: 196, quotes Caroline A. Rhys-Davids' favorable comparison of textual scholars to archaeologists who "dig for the original Troy beneath more than one superimposed city."

48 Hallisey 1995: 34, citing Stanley J. Tambiah, 1984, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 7. Hallisey recognizes T.W. Rhys-Davids as an example of what Said 1978: 122, describes: the "inaugural hero... who carved... out a field of study and a family of ideas which in turn could form a community of scholars whose lineage, traditions, and ambitions were at once internal to the field and external enough for general prestige."

49 Spiro 1982 distinguishes the 'Great Tradition' of "nibbanic" Buddhism from the 'little traditions' of "kammatic" and "apotropaic" Buddhism, respectively concerned with better rebirth and with "man's worldly welfare." These may in fact be better understood as poles bounding a spectrum of practices. I have witnessed views and activities at quite disparate points along this continuum displayed by individual modern Burmese Buddhists (1998-2002 C.E.), both lay and ordained. Stanley J. Tambiah writes that dichotomies between 'Great' and 'Little' traditions "have been mistaken in two important respects: first, insufficient regard was paid to the fact that great literary tradition is itself varied and has been both cumulative and changing; secondly, it has for some curious reason not been seen that contemporary live religion, even that observed in the village, incorporates a great deal of the literary tradition," in *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults of North-east Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 3-4, cited in Collins 1990b: 17.

the PTS were firmly embedded in their Protestant context, with its rejection of religious intermediaries, dogma, and ritual in favor of personal religion and scriptural fundamentalism. Their translations and scholarship provided "impetus" for the 'Protestant Buddhism' that flourished among Sinhalese and Burmese educated under the English colonial system of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement "underlined and extended" the traditional Theravādin "conservative and/or reformist, text-oriented self-definition."[50] Modern, educated, urban 'Buddhists' thus rejected religious tradition with its mythology and ritual, attempting a return to an 'original' Buddhism which, they asserted, had been both 'rational' and 'scientific'. Richard Gombrich points out, however, that such claims could only be made with reference to the English concepts, even in Sinhala discourse.[51]

The Vipassanā meditation movement lead by the Mahāsi Sayadaw became popular in the context of the 'Buddhist Revival', the post-independence manifestation of 'Protestant Buddhism' in Burma. It has continued to emphasize scriptural study and meditative practice of the 'original' teachings, while discounting the importance of popular 'Buddhist' rituals and spirit worship. The Prime Minister of Burma during the Revival, U Nu, consciously modeled his government's patronage of Buddhism on archetypal figures from Buddhist history. Specifically, the accounts of communal recitations held to establish the 'orthodox' teachings of the Buddha under Emperor Asoka in the third

50 Collins 1990a: 102. Though "conservative and/or reformist" might be a confusing description of the Theravāda, it is true that the tradition defined itself as conservative about the Pāḷi and as a reform back to the early, original teachings.

51 Gombrich 1991b: 195. Gombrich and Obeyesekere, in *Buddhism Transformed*, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 223-4, note that the "modern Sinhala word for religion is *āgama* and for Buddhism is *Buddhāgama*." In one 1965 publication, an author representing 'Buddhism' as a 'way of life' rather than a 'religion' apparently "tried to translate his English idea word-for-word into Sinhala," resulting in "a sentence that one can only translate literally as 'The Buddhist religion is not a religion'."

century B.C.E. and again under the Burmese king Anawratha (1044-77 C.E.) provided the impetus and the form for the Sixth Saṅghāyana held in Rangoon in 1954, at which the Mahāsi Sayadaw was awarded the central role of questioner.[52]

The Burmese tradition to which the Mahāsi Sayadaw belonged has not followed modern academics' rejection of the Commentaries in interpreting the Tipiṭaka Pāḷi. At its extreme, the search for an essential and 'original' Buddhism buried beneath the commentarial strata denies that the effectiveness of a teaching depends on the human context. Even given a comprehensive and historically accurate account of the Buddha's words, there is no guarantee that those words would mean the same thing in the context of European thought. Modern scholars have "no privileged access to totality," but rather approach the study of history with particular objectives and assumptions conditioned by their own situation.[53] George Bond points out that

52 As *pucchaka*, 'questioner', the Mahāsi Sayadaw would inquire as to the details and content of each Pāḷi text, which his counterpart, in this case the Mingun Tipiṭakadhāra Sayadaw, would furnish from memory, to be confirmed by the assembly of monks. The Mahāsi Sayadaw's prestigious credentials made him uniquely suited to represent the Burmese 'Buddhist Revival', of which the Saṅghāyana held in Rangoon in 1956 was the "centrepiece." In particular, he was a proficient scholar of the Pāḷi texts, a "widely respected" teacher of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, and a friend of U Nu and his government, notes Mendelson 1975: 267-8. The second century B.C.E. success of the monk Moggaliputta-tissa and his royal patron Asoka in purifying the *Saṅgha* and 'defining orthodoxy' through such a Saṅghāyana has "shone as a model and an inspiring example before every later Buddhist king," writes Richard Gombrich, "The Evolution of the Saṅgha," according to Gombrich 1991a: 83. Another such pair, the Burmese king Anawratha and the Mon monk Shin Arahan, are reported to have established the Theravāda in Burma by purifying the *Saṅgha* of the Mahāyāna and Tantric schools which preceded it there. Their example has impacted the legitimation of rulers in Burma through today; "a favorite Burmese metaphor is that the great king shines like the resplendent golden sun and he should be matched by a pure and radiant moon of a monkhood living by the orthodox teachings of the Buddha," notes Ferguson 1978: 67.

53 The quotation here is abstracted from Steiner 1998: 309, that since interpretation depends on individuals' partial descriptions of the world, there can be no "'complete translation', i.e. a definitive insight into and

if more than twenty schools of thought arose through disagreements over what constituted the 'original' teachings just in the first few hundred years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, it seems unlikely that modern scholarship, removed by two millennia of social and philosophical change, will be able to do much better.

If trying to uncover some 'essential' or 'original' formulation underneath various traditions is not a valid approach to the diverse teachings ascribed to 'the Buddha', what are the alternatives? In order to understand the plurality of different traditions, Bond advocates careful study of the cumulative tradition of commentarial material, as well as the canonical texts. Many Theravādins have regarded the classical Commentaries as the authoritative, indeed indispensable, exegesis of the Pāḷi Tipiṭaka. Modern Burmese monks often ascribe these commentaries to fully awakened *arahats* among the Buddha's immediate disciples. There is thus a strong tendency to regard as corrupted those canonical texts that would contradict the assertions of the commentators. A few powerful monks have taken issue with this extreme stance, however, notably the Mahāsi Sayadaw. The Theravādin commentators apparently intended their writings in the *Aṭṭhakathā* – literally 'discussions on the meaning' – more as explorations than absolute statements of truth, according to Warder's reading.

> ...we have in these ancient 'discussions on the meaning' not a dogmatic system but an enquiry carried on by these old teachers of the school into the real nature of things. They build on what has come down to them but they also seek to extend and improve it, and some conclusions they offer as tentative or controversial.[54]

Later scholars in Southeast Asia may not always have understood these works in the way they were originally intended,

generalization of the way in which any human being relates word to object."

54 Warder 2000: 310, points to empirical explorations such as observations of how sound travels at DhsA 313.

according to their native interpretive principles. It is clear, in any case, that the Commentaries have greatly influenced what Theravādins have taken to be the practice, and that modern scholars neglect these works at the risk of failing to understanding how the tradition has understood itself.

The Theravādin commentators employed a particular historicist approach to the texts and the tradition. The Commentaries use a term from the Pāḷi to specify the lineage of teaching, practice, and realization originating with the Buddha and concerned with 'awakening': *Buddha-Sāsana*. I have already discussed the importance of *Dhamma-Vinaya* and *paṭicca-samupādā* as analytical concepts native to the tradition itself. *Buddha-Sāsana* is the third such conceptual tool that I suggest adopting in order to come to an authentic understanding of the transmission of the Mahāsi Sayadaw's teachings across time and cultural differences.

In the Paḷi, 'sāsana' refers to an "order, message, or teaching."[55] Here the truth of how things are is distinguished from the communication of these truths. Richard Gombrich contends that "the Buddha took a non-essentialist view of Buddhism itself," separating "the content of the teachings, the *dharma*, from their institutionalization, which in the Theravāda tradition came to be called *sāsana*."[56] In the 'Discourse on the Order of Things', the Buddha elaborates on his direct knowledge of reality, describing three universal characteristics of phenomena: impermanence, *anicca*, the suffering this lack of reliability engenders, *dukkha*, and the lack of solid, lasting identity within this flux, *anattā*.

> The Blessed One said, 'Whether or not there is the arising of Tathāgatas [Buddhas], this property stands – this steadfastness of the Dhamma, this orderliness of the Dhamma: All processes are inconstant... stressful... not-self... The Tathagata directly awakens to that, breaks through to that. Directly awakening & breaking through to that, he declares it, teaches it, describes it, sets it

55 Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "sāsana," 707.
56 Gombrich 1996: 4.

> forth. He reveals it, explains it, & makes it plain: All processes are inconstant... stressful... not-self...[57]

One who has penetrated these truths can then explain them to others, as well as the path to reach this realization. In a few Pāḷi discourses, the Buddha predicted how long such 'true teachings' would last, and the causes that would lead to the "longevity of the true Dhamma."[58] In discussing this point, commentators used the term '*sāsana*' in the sense of the living tradition, outlining its rise, continuation, and decline.[59]

The Commentaries elaborate three aspects of the *Buddha-Sāsana*: (1) the *pariyatti sāsana*, the theoretical study of the teachings; (2) the *paṭipatti sāsana*, the practical application of the teachings; and (3) the *paṭivedha sāsana*, the realization of the teachings. "If Theravāda Buddhists want to refer to Buddhism not just as a doctrine but as a phenomenon in history, a whole religion, they usually call it the Sāsana, the Teaching," Gombrich observes.[60] The *Buddha-Sāsana* includes teachings for awakening transmitted through a process of communication and interpretation from teacher to student from the time of the Buddha through to today, as well as the historical application of these teachings, and the awakenings that have followed. Using this sense, the Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa, while I was acting as his interpreter recently, spoke of how his partnership with American teachers benefits the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sāsana*, which he defined as

> the process of establishing of the Buddha's true *dhamma*, the peaceful true *dhamma*, in the hearts of all the women and men of

---

57 Dhamma-niyama/Uppādā Sutta (A.III.137){I,286}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. These linguistic formulations are of course representations of the truth, not the principles themselves (though subject to them).

58 E.g. Gotami Sutta (A.VIII.51){IV,278}; Saddhammappatirūpaka Sutta (S.XVI.13){II,225}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

59 SA. XVI.13{II,202ff}

60 Gombrich 1991b: 3.

> the world, of all the human beings here [on Earth]. When this is successful the earth becomes more and more peaceful.[61]

The *Sāsana* is an historical phenomenon, a tradition of interpretation and application that changes over time. We can use the term *sāsana* to refer to what Wilfred Cantwell Smith calls a "cumulative tradition": causally connected instances of hermeneutical institutions. Such an approach can explore historical developments without offending the faith of adherents of any religion by allowing for success in any tradition as that teaching defines it. This permits an examination of the Burmese Theravāda based not on the quality or authenticity of realizations within any particular lineage or of any particular person, but rather on the "genetic bond of continuity, and... the sociological one of cohesion." Thus we can view various practices "as being historically related without necessarily being uniform; for the existential association, no essential identity is required (or denied). The historical reality can thus be seized."[62]

A 'Skillful Approach'

I have tried here to develop an approach to the transmission of the Mahāsi system based on three concepts native to the tradition itself: the 'Doctrine and Discipline' (*Dhamma-Vinaya*), dependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), and a 'cumulative tradition' of awakening (*Buddha-Sāsana*). Using these three together, we can describe the arising of the practice together with and dependent on present conditions and their antecedents through a historically continuous and culturally cohesive process of interpretation and transmission. This approach resonates well with some recent scholarship on the early history of the Buddha's

61 U Lakkhaṇa, Kyaswa Foreign Yogi Retreat, Sagaing Hills, Upper Burma, January 2002.
62 Smith 1978: 167.

teachings. The work of Steve Collins, including an article "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon," has convincingly demonstrated that early Theravādin understandings were shaped by their historical context. In this approach, Collins follows his doctoral supervisor, Richard Gombrich.

> To see the genesis of the Buddha's teachings as conditioned by the religious milieu in which it arose is to adopt a truly Buddhist viewpoint which I also believe to be good historiography.[63]

A few scholars have reflected on how various approaches to textual interpretation influence the understanding of Buddhist history. At least until recently, modern academics have mainly employed an approach to history that assumed their own privileged 'scientific' view of Buddhism. Such scholars have used the text-critical approach in order to discount as 'spurious', for instance, the texts 'concerning dhamma' which developed out of the early *mātika* lists, namely Abhidhamma. However, judging ancient texts based on our own peculiar set of values may tells us more about what we believe than about what the Buddha believed. As Steiner puts it, "we are growing wary of the hermeneutic circularity which may subvert the decipherment of a message from the past or from cultural-social contexts radically alien to our own."[64] Thanissaro Bhikkhu gives a radical critique of Western scholars' numerous attempts to apply the historical method to the Pāḷi, testing whether these texts are an authoritative record of the Buddha's own words. Such efforts, he says, have resulted in "a mass of minor facts and probabilities – showing that the Pali Canon is *probably* the closest detailed record we have of the Buddha's teachings – but nothing more certain than that." Thanissaro suggests that such inconclusive findings demonstrate "the inadequacy of the historical method as a tool for ascertaining the Dhamma," rather than indicating that the teachings of the Pāḷi are not authentic on their own terms.[65]

63 Gombrich 1996: 14.

64 Steiner 1998: 374.

65 Thanissaro 2002b.

Modern attempts to unearth the original 'early Buddhism' from the layers of Theravādin (or other) traditions largely assume a linear conception of history that belongs to the Greco-Judaic tradition. The Hebrews saw time as progressing from the moment of creation through to a final *teleos*. The civilizations of India that predated the Āryans, on the other hand, understood the process of history as a beginningless and endless round. This cyclical understanding resurfaced in the ideals of the renunciate movement 2500 years ago and became embedded throughout the discourses of the Pāḷi. From this perspective, 'early' and 'late' are not such important distinctions. I suggest below that a particular cumulative tradition is defined more by the way it selects and interprets information than by the content of any particular selection, that the efficacy of a body of teaching and practice at achieving its stated goals derives more from its hermeneutic principles than from the subjects it focuses on.[66] If so, a tradition that defines authenticity as a function of position in time according the Western historical (text-critical) method is a discipline of History rather than a *buddha-sāsana*.

Jonathan Walters points out that the "final results of an enterprise devoted entirely to judging suttas on the basis of standards which do not belong to them turns out to be hand-wringing, uneasy compromise and ennui." Walters demonstrates how Pāḷi discourses can be seen as 'social facts' of the cultural contexts that produced them. Thus, rather than taking a text at face value, modern scholars can read it as a reflection of the interests and concerns that prompted the composition or later interpretations of the text.[67] Following this approach, it might

66 Please see the discussion on p.88.

67 Walters 1999: 259. He analyzes four approaches, beginning with the 'Orientalist' "historical source mode." Walters describes a second mode: examination of a *sutta* as a "text of its day" reflecting discourse "to and about outsiders," and a third: "textual whole mode," exemplified by Steve Collin's work focusing on evidence of later composition in the context of interpretation by fellow Buddhists. The fourth "later reading mode" would examine evidence of which, and how, texts have been interpreted by the

prove rewarding to look carefully at those discourses that the historical method itself would suggest belong to the most recent Buddha. The principles that I find implicit and explicit in these texts include a guideline – different from that of Western History – for determining which parts of the Pāḷi texts should be taught as authentic Dhamma: that which leads to awakening.[68]

John Maraldo has pointed to the "possibility of a Buddhist sense of history," writing that academics "should not hesitate to articulate Buddhist notions of history and their relevance for modern buddhology." K. R. Norman, a late president of the PTS, argued for "the need to be impartial, which is essential if one is to be accurate in one's translation."[69] The word 'impartial', however, in Western scholarship often covers for 'partial to the values of the European Enlightenment' as opposed to any other approach to knowledge and understanding. Every interpreter brings some set of values to their work. Referring to Martin Heidegger's point that any human understanding arises in a particular historical context, Maraldo argues that modern scholars

> need to reflect upon our own 'hermeneutical strategies' and our own 'hermeneutical situation' vis-à-vis the tradition, if we are to do justice to the figures and texts that we investigate.[70]

Most scholarship on 'Buddhism in America' has not addressed these methodological issues.[71] I know of no in-depth

---

later tradition.

68 E.g. Siṃsapa Sutta, quoted on page 11.

69 Norman 1984: 86, "There are undoubtedly some who translate because they wish to proselytize. They regard the contents of the [Pāḷi] texts as revealed truths which they wish to make known to others in order to persuade them to join their religion. It is debatable how far this can be consistent with the need to be impartial, which is essential if one is to be accurate in one's translation."

70 Maraldo 1986: 41-2.

71 Coleman 2001: 10, does include a very brief discussion of why the author "decided to look at this new Buddhism as a whole," but otherwise seems not to address the issue of method, as well as some the most recent and penetrative scholarship in this field. In his introduction, Seager 1999: ix, writes that "in a book for general readership, there is no call for extensive reflection on methodology or a lengthy examination of the contributions of

examinations of Theravādin hermeneutics in the American context, no analyses of how people native to the liberal philosophical environment of modern America are going about the exegesis and understanding of this conservative tradition.[72] Academic interest in the hermeneutical methods of Buddhist traditions in Asia is strong, but with very few exceptions, non-Mahāyāna traditions have been neglected.[73] For its methodology, as for its name, the field of Buddhist Hermeneutics has drawn on the European tradition of hermeneutics, which developed from strategies of Biblical exegesis. Maraldo critiques the unselfconscious application of such theories to Asian history, and advocates an examination of academic scholars' own ways of understanding Buddhist traditions. This enterprise is critical, I

---

earlier scholars." Even Williams and Queen 1999, in a volume entitled *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, do not provide an explicit philosophical framework for thier examination of "Modes of Dharma Transmission." Prebish 1999 does include an interesting discussion of Western scholars' approaches to 'Buddhism'. Batchelor 2000: 109-112, develops a sophisticated historical approach to Buddhism that "reveals each of its forms to lack a solid, fixed essence," as he describes it. Unfortunately, hermeneutical issues are not addressed explicitly in Batchelor 1994, *The Awakening Of The West: The Encounter Of Buddhism And Western Culture*, though the chapter on "Satipaṭṭhāna: Mindful Awareness" contains some insightful comments about the Vipassanā communities in Europe and the United States.

72 Numrich 1996, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples,* is primarily a sociological analysis of communities which have imported their entire philosophical context from Asia; the focus is thus on how Thais and Sri Laṅkans are adapting their religious establishments to the U.S. Though Numrich does touch on an interesting phenomenon of "parallel congregations" of American converts, this work is only peripherally relevant to the question of how Theravādin meditation practices are interpreted by and for native-born Americans. Tworkov 1989 and Lopez 1998 discuss interpretations of two Mahāyāna traditions in modern America. Tweed 1992 gives an historical account of *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent.*

73 The anthology *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, edited by Lopez 1988, is the largest body of work yet in this field. Aside from some stray comments in Lamotte's survey, only one out of twelve chapters, Bond's "The Gradual Path," deals with a non-Mahāyāna tradition.

think, not only for academics but also for practitioners to understand their own traditions. Since people understand *Dhamma-Vinaya* in different ways, and since what individuals practice depends on what they take to be the authoritative teachings, the processes of interpreting and of engaging the tradition are inextricably bound.

Text and context are bound together in a relationship of mutual exchange. The great generousity and high morality of the Burmese people are testimony to the enormous impact texts can have on shaping the society that maintains them. The sheer diversity of traditions today illustrates that what is taken to be *Dhamma-Vinaya* depends very much on the human context. Modern scholarship has shown how later historical developments have shaped which early texts are given authority. Harold Coward writes that "the relationship between a religious community and its scripture is complex, reciprocal and... central to the normative self-definition of a religion."[74] Modern readings by scholars and practitioners of the Theravāda also exhibit this kind of complex interaction: interpretation of the texts and of experiences shapes the definition of the tradition, which in turn shapes later understandings. Steiner recognizes that "such circularity... is an inevitable, perhaps necessary attribute of any discourse, of any articulate commentary whose object is itself 'textual'."[75]

To act within such a reciprocal relationship, we must take care. Anything done to the text alters the culture that surrounds it, and any change in the social environment affects how the text is interpreted. This holistic understanding of the *Sāsana* has inspired some of us in recent years to return to the source of the Mahāsi tradition ourselves, and to provide support for others to come and practice in Burma, as well. By practicing the classical Theravādin teachings in the Burmese context, we attempt to

74 Coward 1992: 129.
75 Steiner 1978: 1, in the article "Text and Context."

know the tradition as much as possible on its own terms, to pay attention and pay respect to this culture that has so benefited us. A similar kind of reciprocity is necessary as well in academic study of the Theravāda: if the scholarly community draws information and knowledge from this tradition, it is incumbent on us to try to understand and present the teachings on their own terms. To misrepresent the tradition by imposing Western assumptions on it is not only poor scholarship, it directly affects the object of our study.

At least one passage in the Pāḷi describes how effective practice depends on *upāya kusalo*, a 'skillful approach'.[76] If people's understanding of *Dhamma-Vinaya* defines the tradition of practice, academics and meditation teachers must employ a similar type of care in order to interpret the Mahāsi Sayadaw's teachings respectfully and responsibly. In analyzing the transmission from Burma to Barre, I try to employ a 'skillful approach' that is rooted the Theravādin tradition itself. Specifically, I describe the practice as it arises together with and dependent on both present conditions at IMS and the 'cumulative tradition' that has been transmitted and interpreted in South and Southeast Asia for the past two and a half millennia.

76 E.g. Adhigamma Sutta (A.VI.79){III,431}, where the term is listed along with *āya kusalo* and *apāya kusalo*, 'skillful going' and 'skillful coming'. Though '*upāya kusalo*' is often translated as 'skillful means', the gloss 'skillful approach' actually follows more directly from the term's etymology and context in the Pāḷi. Rhys Davids 1999, *s.v.* "upāya," 149, gives the primary meaning as "approach," though it does note figurative uses: "way, means, expedient, stratagem."

III

Trans-lation

the process of interpretation and its authentic completion

Watching and participating in interpretation at meditation retreats over the past five years, I have found a range of styles. On the one extreme are literal word for word renderings, where the interpreter picks the most appropriate English gloss to match the original Burmese, and ignores the significant differences between American and Burmese expectations for sentence structure, organization of thoughts, amount of repetition, political correctness, and so on. On the other extreme, Asian teachers' statements sometimes seem to be used as a springboard for interpreters to espouse their own views. There is a range of options between literal rendering and total recreation. No matter where along this spectrum the interpreter chooses to work, however, the meaning of the original text in its original linguistic context is altered every time it is moved into the vocabulary of a different culture.[1] Word for word interpretation is not necessarily

1 Steiner 1998: 437, "There is between 'translation proper' and 'transmutation' a vast terrain of 'partial transformation'. The verbal signs in the original message or statement are modified by one of a multitude of means or by a combination of means. These include paraphrase, graphic illustration, pastiche, imitation, thematic variation, parody, citation in a supporting or undermining context, false attribution (accidental or deliberate), plagiarism, collage, and many others. This zone of partial transformation, of derivation, of alternate restatement determines much of our sensibility and literacy. It is, quite simply, the matrix of culture... To

more true to the original meaning than what Steiner calls "appropriate recreation," often quite the opposite. For instance, Burmese monks tend to emphasize a particular point by repeating it nearly verbatim many times in the same talk; American speakers know that they will bore the audience or insult their listeners' intelligence if they repeat themselves without varying how they phrase their points. In such cases, interpreters are forced to make choices between communicating what they think the teacher intended and rendering the Burmese word for word.

With the luxury of time, reference to dictionaries and other resources, translation of a written text can achieve some precision, if never perfection. Simultaneous or consecutive interpretation of spoken discourse is hurried and inexact in comparison, though the hermeneutic motion is similar. An analogous process is involved when Americans trained by Asian meditation masters teach, in turn, to American students. Teachers interpret from, and through, the understandings they have developed in their own practice. The challenges for such deep transmission are very similar to those for consecutive interpretation and written translation. Whether one is rendering words spoken moments before or understandings of ancient teachings developed over years of personal experience,

> The craft of the translator is... deeply ambivalent: it is exercised in a radical tension between impulses to facsimile and impulses to appropriate recreation. In a very specific way, the translator 're-experiences' the evolution of language itself, the ambivalence of the relations between language and world, between 'languages' and 'worlds'.[2]

---

what extent is culture the translation and rewording of previous meaning?" And, 319, "The perennial distinction between literalism, paraphrase, and free imitation, turns out to be wholly contingent. It has no precision or philosophic basis. It overlooks the key fact that a fourfold *hermeneia*, Aristotle's term for discourse which signifies because it interprets, is conceptually and practically inherent in even the rudiments of translation."

2 Steiner 1998: 246.

If each individual occupies a different 'world of experience', if each of us has slightly different associations with words, then every interpretation involves motion and change.[3] "Any model of communication is at the same time a model of trans-lation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance," Steiner observes, referring to the term's derivation through French from the Latin *trāns-* and *lātus*, the past participle of *ferre* ('to bear'), thus 'borne across'.[4] To determine how their message 'gets across', meditation masters make conscious and unconscious choices in rendering, and in leaving unsaid, aspects of the tradition they have inherited. If so, teaching of *Dhamma-Vinaya* must involve hermeneutics – what Steiner calls the "disciplined understanding of understanding" – be it implicit or explicit.[5]

How do people go about interpreting between human contexts? Steiner, for one, doubts that there can ever be, "in any rigorous sense of the term, a 'theory of translation'." No one can fully understand how any other person "relates word to object," so there can be no impartial assessment of interpretation in general. Nonetheless, the sketch of translation between languages that Steiner does venture proves quite illuminating and useful for analyzing the practice of this "exact art." [6]

Drawing on the European tradition of translation studies, Steiner describes four stages in the process of interpretation, what he calls the "hermeneutic motion." An interpreter begins by

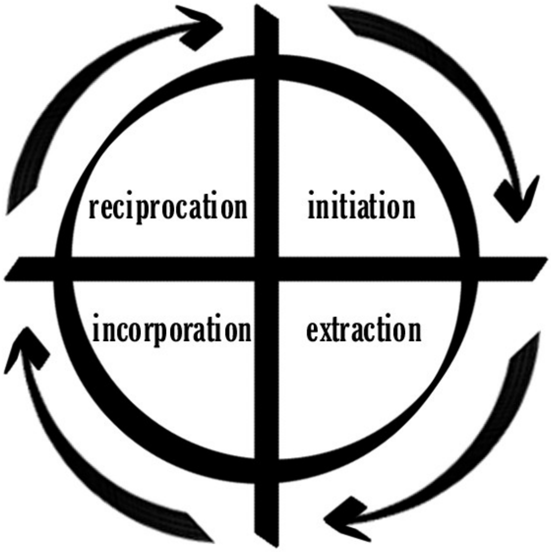
3 Please see Ānanda's definition of *lokasaññī* on p.179.

4 Steiner 1998: 47; *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), *s.v.* "translate," 1902, "Middle English *translaten*, from Old [*sic*] French *translater*, from Latin *trānslātus*, past participle of *trānsferre*, to transfer: -*trāns*, -trans + *lātus*, brought." According to the appendix on "Indo-European Roots," 2129, the Latin *ferre* and English 'bear' are both derived from proto-Indo-European **bher*, a burden or load. According to Roy Wright, *translater* was used in Middle, not Old, French.

5 Steiner 1978: 1. Though Paul Ricoeur, among others, uses the term 'hermeneutics' exclusively to refer to explicit methodology of interpretation, the definition used here follows Steiner and recent scholarship in Buddhist studies.

6 Steiner 1998: 311.

advancing towards the undeciphered text, presuming some value there. Next is the "invasive and exhaustive" appropriation of meaning from the source, which dispels the mystique of the unknown and leaves the text exposed to examination. The interpreter then brings the meaning home, assimilating foreign symbols and ideas into the native culture and language. Calling something a translation assumes these three: approach, decipherment, and rendering in a new tongue. This much may be somewhat obvious.



Steiner's great contribution lies in his recognition of the fourth and final part of the 'hermeneutic motion'. It is through a return to the source, through fulfilling unfulfilled potential as well as through revealing and demonstrating the original's own strengths, that a rendering becomes authentic. As we examine the intricacies of this fourfold process, and especially as we extend Steiner's analysis to the process of deep transmission, it is important to remember that this analogy is, of course, an abstraction and a simplification.

> The relations of a text to its translations, imitations, thematic variants, even parodies, are too diverse to allow of any single theoretic, definitional scheme. They categorize the entire question of the meaning of meaning in time, of the existence and effects of the linguistic fact outside its specific, initial form. But

> there can be no doubt that echo enriches, that it is more than shadow and inert simulacrum.[7]

Imbalance

The first movement Steiner observes is one of "initiative trust." The translator must posit some significance, some understanding to be gained by deciphering the text. The vulnerability here is similar in many ways to that of an individual's or a society's introduction to the teachings of *Dhamma-Vinaya.* In the beginning stages of the practice, as in those of translation, "the donation of trust remains ontologically spontaneous and anticipates proof, often by a long, arduous gap." Though this initiation is often taken for granted, it is not necessarily self-evident that translation between two very different systems of language and culture is even possible. The requisite trust

> derives from a sequence of phenomenological assumptions about the coherence of the world, about the presence of meaning in very different, perhaps formally antithetical semantic systems, about the validity of analogy and parallel.[8]

Transmission begins with a tentative faith in the source, whose value is yet unconfirmed.

The second movement of translation is "incursive and extractive," writes Steiner. Here he follows Heidegger's analysis of understanding as violent and "inherently appropriative." The translator of texts, like the student of the Buddha's teachings, must 'grasp' the meaning. In doing so, each breaks open the shell of exotic 'otherness', leaving the original exposed to view, to critique as well as to appreciation.

---

7 Steiner 1998: 317.

8 Steiner 1998: 312-3.

> Every schoolchild, but also the eminent translator, will note the shift in substantive presence which follows on a protracted or difficult exercise in translation: the text in the other language has become almost materially thinner, the light seems to pass unhindered through its loosened fibres. For a spell the density of hostile or seductive 'otherness' is dissipated.[9]

Interpretation between languages, almost by definition, makes ideas from one society available to another. Modern American high schools' use of 'Indian' mascots, with their lobster-red skin, feather headdresses, and tomahawks, is only one of the most recent instances in a long history of Europeans' appropriation of the Native Americans' world(s): their land, their symbols, their lives. Indeed, cultural appropriation is occasionally physically violent, and rarely is it an equal exchange. Jay Garfield points out that in discussions of philosophy, "Euro-American academics meet Tibetan or Indian academics on terms of unequal power." Garfield points to not only the disparity in terms of access to funds, library resources, technology, and publishing, but also to the fact that "most of the professional literature on Tibetan philosophy is published in English, Italian, or German, languages that many of the most distinguished Tibetan philosophers neither read nor speak."[10] All aspects and traditions of 'American Buddhism' are born of importation, and not every instance has been reciprocated.

Marco Polo and his contemporaries provided Europeans with the first popular accounts of India and Asia; the exotic images of peace, harmony, and spiritual riches projected eastward since that time persist today with rock bands named "Nirvana" and movies like *The Golden Child*. The act of interpretation necessarily takes from the source and transforms it to some degree; we need not condemn pop culture representations of foreign ideas and ideals to recognize that they are incomplete, that they leave something to be desired, that they are not totally authentic

---

9 Steiner 1998: 314.

10 Garfield 2002: 231.

renderings.[11] A number of cultures have protected sacred texts, teachings, and rituals by restricting or prohibiting their translation for outsiders; certain sects in India, for instance, traditionally restricted one-on-one teaching of the sacred texts to males of their particular caste, and regarded any interpretations that might arise outside of that personal transmission as unauthentic, in the sense of not conveying the meaning of the texts at all.

Translation always involves incorporation and "assimilation" into a new linguistic context. This third cycle of the hermeneutic motion is potentially dangerous, Steiner warns. The essential message can be lost or distorted in the process of transmission, for one. Mark Epstien points out how the Freudian idea of 'ego' has been misrepresented by English-language accounts of Theravādin *satipaṭṭhāna*.

> The word used in translation [for *anattā*], 'egolessness', has brought with it connotations of an upsurge in primary process thinking and id-dominated intrapsychic forces that are often mistakenly embraced by Western practitioners eager to jettison their egos. As a result, concepts that include the Buddhist 'anatman' (no-self) doctrine and the psychodynamic 'ego' are often understood only superficially, hampering dialogue and understanding between the two traditions.[12]

The act of translation contains a potential threat not only to the message, but also to the receiving cultural context. New words and understandings enter a "native semantic field... already extant and crowded," and threaten "infection" and transformation. The ecological analogy here is to the fragile web of interactions between endemic species and the transformations wrought by alien introductions, both ill and well intentioned,

---

11 Lopez 1998 has catalogued the Western idealization of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism thoroughly, if somewhat unsympathically, in a book titled in reference to "Tibetan lamas in exile and their students," the *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 13.

12 Epstein 1988: 61.

such as the mosquito and the mongoose in Hawai'i.[13] If symbols have meaning by virtue of their associations, a new creation or importation sets off "a kind of reverberation down through the network of entailments that awakens and connects our memories" and frames future experience.[14] Through quiet infiltration or rapid deluge, foreign imports can overwhelm particular aspects of a culture's identity. The French have passed stringent laws prohibiting certain public uses of English, because their language has become so endangered by the dominance of "U.S. films and TV, popular music and commercial fiction..., along with Levi's [*sic*] and Coca-Cola."[15] This is a prime instance of how the exchange of cultural ideas does not always generate mutual understanding. Steiner sees any kind of interpretation as inherently "aggressive and, at one level, destructive." Nonetheless, he points out how unhealthy intentions motivating the importation, or the fragile state of a recipient context, can sabotage efforts to import foreign understandings to a new culture. In such cases, the new introduction

13 When the European roof rat (*Rattus rattus*) came to Hawai'i on Western ships in the 1870s, it proliferated in the cane fields planted by *ha'ole* (Caucasian) settlers. In one of the most ill-conceived ecological manipulations by human beings to date, Indian mongooses (*Herpestes auropunctatus*) were introduced to Hawai'i from Jamaica as predators for the rats. Since the roof rat is primarily a nocturnal and arboreal species, whereas the mongoose is primarily diurnal and terrestrial, the two had little effect on each other. Together, however, they have decimated the indigenous bird species by day and by night. Culliney 1988: 257.

Then in 1826 a ship took on water at San Blas, Mexico on its way to the harbor at Lahaina, Maui; on arrival, the sailors found to their dismay that the Christian missionaries – to prevent vice and venereal disease – had begun prohibiting Hawaiian women from swimming out to meet *ha'ole* visitors. In retaliation, the crew knowingly dumped into the harbor water infested with larvae of the tropical night-flying mosquito (*Culex pipens fatigans*). The offspring of these insects have brought avian malaria to all the major Hawaiian islands, leaving only the most remote high-altitude forests as viable habitat for the remaining indigenous birds, with the exception of a very few hardy species. Warner 1973: 36-8.

14 Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 140.

15 Lottman 1994: 16-17.

> will generate not an integral response but a wash of mimicry... After a time, the native organism will react, endeavoring to neutralize or expel the foreign body.[16]

The history of the transmission of the Buddha's teachings to China and Tibet illustrates the danger Steiner warns of. In both cases, an initial success, including state patronage for the study and promulgation of the teachings, was followed by an "indigenous backlash" against the foreign intrusion.[17] More than a few importations of foreign ideas have involved imposition; the temptation to proselytize menaces at this stage. Regardless of the mode or intention, the induction of new understandings can threaten a society's identity when it is in a period of major transition. Steiner cites the "cargo-cults of New Guinea, in which the natives worship what airplanes bring in," as a striking illustration of cultural identity loss.[18] Though the power dynamic is very different, indiscriminate New-Age appropriation of sensationalized Eastern Spirituality is unsettlingly similar.

What allows such blind faith in foreign imports to develop? Superficial and incomplete understanding of the original message in its original context. Without extensive study of an Indian or Celtic or Japanese cultural practice in its native environment, without knowing how the parts fit together and how they relate to the culture around them, modern teachers cannot hope to get such practices to American soil alive. Today we find, for instance, Insight meditation being taught without the foundation of morality; such mangled and piecemeal transmissions cannot last long. Only by knowing the roles the Theravāda has played in other cultures can we realize the potential of the Theravāda in the U.S.A. Even American adaptations of the Buddha's teachings done with the best of intentions, but without returning to the source or without a source to return to, eventually degrade the quality of the teachings that will reach future generations.

16 Steiner 1998: 315.

17 Batchelor 2000: 42.

18 Steiner 1998: 316.

Cultural and textual importation, without the completion of reciprocity, leaves the system "off-balance." The hermeneutic motion begins with an advance towards the text. The interpreter delves in, 'gets something out of' the source, and heads home "laden." In the process of textual importation, the recipient community gains new understandings. "There has been an outflow of energy from the source and an inflow into the receptor altering both and altering the harmonics of the whole system." Both the translated text and the new context are changed, to a greater or lesser degree, for better or worse.[19]

In the new language, certain words can have associations that are quite different from their connotations in the original context; an interpreter can not help but to add meaning and 'read into' the original in places, or to miss some of the source's significance and subtle ambiguities in other places. In the process of interpretation, a poet's work or a discourse from the Pāḷi is made vulnerable to misreading, misunderstanding, misrepresentation. The text's very identity is on the line. Moreover, where a rendering proves novel or valuable, the recipient culture has been broadened, augmented, enriched. Translation and transmission thus entail a responsibility to the source.

> The a-prioristic movement of trust puts us off balance. We 'lean towards' the confronting text... We circle and invade cognitively. We come home laden, thus again off-balance, having caused disequilibrium throughout the system by taking away from 'the other' and by adding, though possibly with ambiguous consequence, to our own. The system is now off-tilt. The hermeneutic act must compensate. If it is to be authentic, it must mediate into exchange and restored parity.[20]

Translation can benefit the source material in a number of ways. The original text, like the ancient tradition, is "enhanced" by translation; it gains access to a new audience; its prestige is

---

19 Steiner 1998: 317-8.

20 Steiner 1998: 316.

increased even at home. Seeing foreigners come great distances to Burma to study with meditation masters has inspired many local Buddhists to undertake meditation themselves. Moreover, a text may be illuminated, understood in greater depth through the focused scrutiny translation entails. The London-based Pali Text Society attempted such an excavation, translating the entire Theravādin canon and many of its commentaries into English. The critical scholarship spawned by these efforts has revealed many valuable insights into the history and language of the texts.

The reciprocity that Steiner advocates as a moral imperative of translation, however, has less to do with enhancement than with "fidelity." Faithfulness to the source completes the cycle initiated by trust. What Steiner intends here is "not literalism or any technical device for rendering 'spirit'."

> Often, in the records of translation, a fortunate misreading is the source of new life. The precisions to be aimed at are of an intense but unsystematic kind. Like mutations in the improvement of a species, major acts of translation seem to have a chance necessity. The logic comes after the fact. What we are dealing with is not a science, but an exact art.[21]

The translator intuits ways in which the source text resonates with the new context, brining the audience's attention to the original discourse as much as bringing the discourse to the audience. "The enactment of reciprocity in order to restore balance is the crux of the *métier* and morals of translation."[22] No rendition exists autonomous of its source, though some would give that impression. Where contemporary presentations of philosophical and psychological teachings derived from the Theravādin tradition do not acknowledge their source nor direct inquiry towards the Pāḷi texts, for instance, students can be deprived of the profundity and precision of understanding available in the original. On the other hand, many scholars within the Theravāda and in modern academia have denied, in various

21 Steiner 1998: 311.

22 Steiner 1998: 316, continues, "But it is very difficult to put abstractly."

ways, the formative influence people after the Buddha's death have had on the composition and interpretation of the discourses. Modern renditions do not increase their legitimacy by disregarding their heritage. Rather, the translation of a text, like the transmission of a teaching, becomes authentic by acknowledging and repaying its debt to the source.

Reciprocity

> Genuine translation will... seek to equalize, though the mediating steps may be lengthy and oblique. Where it falls short of the original, the authentic translation makes the autonomous virtues of the original more precisely visible... Where it surpasses the original, the real translation infers that the source-text possesses potentialities, elemental reserves as yet unrealized by itself.[23]

The hermeneutic motion is completed by extending the original's applicability and by revealing its strengths. Having entered, extracted, and imported from it, the responsible interpreter does not abandon the source. The act of appropriation creates an imbalance; equilibrium must be restored by giving the audience's attention to the source, by crediting its virtues and respecting its principles. Thus the new rendition remains rooted in the original. The task of translation or transmission is only fully completed, the debt to the original is only fully repaid, when the "balance of forces, of integral presence" is restored. Perfect parity is never entirely accomplished, of course, "but the ideal makes explicit the demand for equity in the hermeneutic process."[24]

In the Mahāsi tradition, teachers attempt to explain spiritual practices through the means most appropriate and beneficial in each unique situation. A hall full of experienced meditators

23 Steiner 1998: 318, refers here to Schleiermacher's ideal of a hermeneutic that "knows better than the author did."

24 Steiner 1998: 318.

demands a different vocabulary than a corporate boardroom does, as Steven Smith has found.[25] "By virtue of tact, and tact intensified is moral vision," deep understandings of the practice of awakening are nurtured in diverse contexts, and "the translator-interpreter creates a condition of significant exchange. The arrows of meaning, of cultural, psychological benefaction, move both ways."[26]

The annual retreat for foreign practitioners held at the Kyaswa Monastery in the Sagaing Hills of Upper Burma is unique – to the best of my knowledge – in that it is co-taught by a Burmese monk, Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa, and American meditation teachers such as Steven Smith and Michele McDonald. The Sagaing Hills are a spiritual heartland of the Burmese Theravāda, with hundreds of nunneries and monasteries and pagodas dotting a hill range that has been a center of study and practice for centuries. The Foreign Yogi Retreat offers an opportunity for those not fluent in the language or customs of Burma to further their practice while supported by the cultural context in which the Mahāsi tradition of *satipaṭṭhāna* developed. At the closing of the 2002 retreat, Sayadaw was quite explicit about the reason for his collaboration with Western teachers.

> Each benefits the other, of course. [In terms of] certain expressions, usages, and interpretations, the understandings of Westerners and those of our Theravāda *Buddha-Dhamma* are alike. However, while I try to make the teachings according to the

25 Steven Smith described in a personal communication his experiences working for the Contemplative Mind in Society program with leaders from corporate organizations such as Monsanto and Hoffman Laroche, as well as CEOs of national environmental organizations.

26 Steiner 1998: 318. Garfield 2002: 250, makes a similar point in outlining an approach to "genuine dialogue" in the inter-cultural and intra-cultural study of philosophy. "Presume that anything of value must be transactionally gained," he advises, "To come to the task as a pirate, or as a distributor of intellectual charity, is to preclude understanding by precluding interaction. Only through genuine openness can the flowering of two traditions, distant enough to permit perspective, yet close enough to talk, yield the fruits of cross-fertilization and render difference not a barrier to, but a facilitator of, understanding."

> Theravādin view understandable, the Western teachers restate the explanations to make them clearer, to further illuminate them. This is [beneficial] because although Westerners can give teachings, often these lack precise information, because the Westerners know more or less only what their own teachers have taught. The modes of meaning and understanding in the Theravāda are very subtle, in fact; the noble *dhamma* is extremely profound. For those who haven't heard such clarifications before, and who therefore don't yet grasp these nuances, the Theravādin Sayadaws can be of help. And the Myanmar Sayadaws get merit, too. Meditation teachers from the West help us to get across the things we want to say, and they get merit as well. When Western teachers and our own Theravādin scriptural tradition of Myanmar... come together with this understanding and function harmoniously, everyone realizes greater success.[27]

Burmese monks such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita and Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa, who understand English quite well, take great care to make sure that interpreters get their full message across; Sayadaw U Paṇḍita is particularly vigilant, not infrequently correcting the interpreter's English word usage, as well as Pāḷi pronunciation and general presentation style. Foreign students of Burmese meditation masters sometimes feel that the interpreter is giving them short shrift, noting, for instance, that each time the teacher talks for five minutes the interpreter talks for one. This can happen because the interpreter wishes to spare the

---

27 Although I was acting as interpreter for U Lakkhaṇa when he made these remarks, as I reviewed the original recording I was struck by the hurried and inexact nature of the consecutive interpretation I had done on the spot, so I have passed on to readers here the luxury of a rewind button, rerendering the passage from the original Burmese. The idea I have translated in the second sentence as 'understandings', 'ယူဆပုံ' (*ju hsa. poun*), could be rendered more literally as 'ways of taking and weighing [in mind]'. Where this same construction occurs with 'အဓိပ္ပာယ်' (*adei' pe*), 'meaning', as its object, I have used 'interpretation'. For the Burmese 'ဗုဒ္ဓတရား' (*bou' da – taja:*) I have given the Pāḷi '*Buddha-Dhamma*'; the first term is actually an unaltered Pāḷi loanword in Burmese. The Burmese word 'ကုသိုလ်' (*ku. dhou*) was derived by a more circuitous route from the Sanskrit *kuśala*, 'merit, good deed' via the Old Myanmar *kusuil* and the Old Mon *kusuiw*, according to Nai Pan Hla 1998: 23.

audience the traditional repetition, or because the interpreter has not digested the discourse well enough to render its full significance. On the other hand, sometimes interpreters add quite a few of their own conclusions to the presentation. Where an interpreter's attitude agrees with that of the audience such embellishments may not result in noticeable conflict, but this is not always the case. The best interpreters "get out of the way as much as possible."[28] To achieve satisfaction on all sides, "both formally and morally the books must balance."[29]



Northern End of the Sagaing Hills
on the Irrawaddy River, Upper Burma

We have observed some of the challenges involved in translation and interpretation. The analogous process of deep transmission is subject to the same "radical tension between impulses to facsimile and impulses to appropriate recreation" that Steiner describes.[30] Many individual decisions about which ideas and understandings to include, and which to exclude, accumulate over time and come to define a tradition. The hermeneutical principles that direct these choices are at the very heart of transmission. Decisions about interpretation are perhaps the greatest challenge in teaching an ancient tradition in a new context. The British scholar-practitioner Stephen Batchelor puts it well in a recent interview.

> This has been the challenge every time Buddhism has gone from one culture to another: to be truthful to the sources of the

28 Michele McDonald, personal communication.

29 Steiner 1998: 318-9.

30 This quotation from Steiner 1998: 246, is discussed above on p.70.

> tradition while articulating them in a way that meets the needs of one's time.[31]

Teachers of mindfulness meditation in the U.S. have taken many different approaches to this problem, some choosing a strictly conservative interpretation of the Theravāda, others including understandings from Western Science, Psychology, Judaism, Christianity and so on. Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. In order to illustrate in sufficient depth the critical issues involved without spending too many pages on the subject, I focus here on the most recent work of one widely published and well-known teacher of Insight Meditation. Joseph Goldstein is one of a few Americans who played a major role in establishing the Mahāsi tradition in the United States. He tries to meet the 'need of his time' with his most recent book, *One Dharma*. Noting the rapid rate of intellectual exchange between traditions now established in America such as the Tibetan Dzogchen, the Japanese Zen schools, and Theravādin Vipassanā, Goldstein's definition of *One Dharma* embraces many different 'Buddhist' practices. As he warns us, though,

> This exploration leads to some fundamental and thorny issues: ... Do different methods of meditation practice in fact lead to different ends? Or, on the path of One Dharma, is there a way of holding even opposing perspectives in a greater unity?
>
> The investigation of these questions requires great humility. When we step outside the safe bounds of the various individual traditions, each consistent within itself, we need to acknowledge the exploratory nature of a unified theory of Dharma, continually testing it against both our experience and the teachings as they have been passed down over thousands of years.[32]

Goldstein's caution is certainly appropriate. There are real dangers in trying to unify the diversity of 'Buddhist' understandings. The self-consistency of each living tradition, which Goldstein notes above, may be its most valuable asset. A coherent framework and consistent voice support the clarity of

31 Batchelor 2002: 54-55.

32 Goldstein 2002: 4.

purpose necessary for success in any tradition, as Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests.

> ...a system of meditative practice does not constitute a self-contained discipline. Any authentic system of spiritual practice is always found embedded within a conceptual matrix that defines the problems the practice is intended to solve and the goal towards which it is directed. Hence the merging of techniques grounded in incompatible conceptual frameworks is fraught with risk. Although such mergers may appease a predilection for experimentation or eclecticism, it seems likely that their long-term effect will be to create a certain "cognitive dissonance" that will reverberate through the deeper levels of the psyche and stir up even greater confusion.[33]

There may be unseen dangers, as well, in picking particular aspects from living traditions and synthesizing them together. We might make a useful analogy to the development of crops such as corn modified with genetic material from bacteria, which is raising serious objections today. Despite the biotechnology industry's assurances, opponents point to the impossibility of predicting or containing the effects that Genetically Modified organisms have on the surrounding environment, including other farmers wishing to grow purely organic crops. What evidence do teachers and practitioners of the various 'Buddhist' traditions today have that the benefits of cross-fertilization will outweigh the costs over the long term? This should not be a foregone conclusion, despite the tendency – so strong in the 'melting pot' of the United States – towards assimilation and minimizing differences. Respecting diversity is another option, and may well prove more beneficial in the case of meditation practices.

Despite his cautions, Goldstein sees benefit in coupling Theravādin *satipaṭṭhāna* with certain Dzogchen practices, for example, to achieve a common purpose. His confidence in such unions rests on the idea that "all Buddhist traditions converge in one understanding of what liberates the mind." Clinging to

33 Bodhi 1994.

nothing whatsoever as 'I' or 'mine', "is the essential unifying experience of freedom," as Goldstein defines it.[34] He suggests, however, that "philosophical concepts are only descriptions of experience, and not the experience itself."[35] That is, a particular teaching could define its goal as 'non-clinging' and yet not produce the same results as other 'Buddhist' traditions; by the same token, teachings that make no mention of the 'Buddha' or 'non-clinging' could lead practitioners to the 'essential unifying experience of freedom'. If so, we might find experiential convergence in many different human practices, not all of them things that get called 'Buddhist', or even 'spiritual'. If we disregard the various traditions' specific definitions of their goal(s), are there any limits on cross-fertilization with *satipaṭṭhāna*? Whose "experience of freedom" qualifies a particular practice to be part of *One Dharma*?

Recently, I have begun to hear practitioners and teachers talk of *One Dharma* as an emerging tradition of its own, a particular set of teachings and practices to be transmitted between human beings. Though this reading perhaps goes further than Goldstein intended, it is nonetheless not that far-fetched given that he subtitled the book *The Emerging Western Buddhism*. In any case, this understanding of *One Dharma* is seriously problematic: if the self-definition used by a particular living tradition is not the basis for inclusion in this transmission, then somehow someone has to judge which teachings really bring about 'liberation through non-clinging' or 'the realization of non-self', not just for themselves but for all future generations who will practice *One Dharma*. Who is qualified to do that?

I do not wish to suggest that no human being could make competent decisions about which principles and practices could be combined to achieve the goal of liberation from suffering; according to the Theravāda, a *sammāsambuddha* (such as the

34 Goldstein 2002: 134.
35 Goldstein 2002: 5

Sakyamuni) does just that, cultivating the 'perfections' over countless lifetimes to the point of being born and discovering the *saddhamma*, the 'true order-of-things', in a time when there is no such teaching available, and then establishing a *Buddha-Sāsana*, a tradition of awakening, for the benefit of future generations. Only those of us who have yet to perfect our wisdom to the level of a *sammāsambuddha* need depend on – and acknowledge our dependence on – a particular lineage of transmission from the most recent Teacher.

Uprooting certain ideas and practices from the frameworks in which they developed for thousands of years, taking them not on their own terms, may in fact be disrespectful. In his critique of *One Dharma*, "Will it be One or Many?," Reginald Ray writes that "lineage, at least in my [Tibetan] tradition, represents not just a continuity of practices and traditions. At a deeper level, it embodies a particular way of experiencing the awakened state."[36] If Ray is right, equating the goal of Tibetan practice to those other traditions would amount to a denial of the tradition's own understanding of that goal. New interpretations create this disrespectful and dangerous kind of dynamic, Steiner warns, unless they return to the source.

Nathan Katz points out in *Buddhist Images of Human Perfection* that by holding the *arahat* (Sanskrit *arahant*) to be less than fully awakened, the later Mahāyāna texts simply defined the term differently than the Theravādin Pāḷi. The disagreements between the two over the spiritual status of the *arahat*, then, arise because they are using the same term to specify different levels of purity. Their disagreement is over the definition of the word, then, and not really about the relative value of various teachings. The

36 "If so, can Buddhism really be reduced to one thing? Can we be so certain that all the practices lead to one goal and that realization is the same throughout Buddhism? Or is it possible that each lineage had its own distinct personality and that its practices lead to an enlightenment that shows itself uniquely according to lineage? If that is true, what is lost when we give up the identity, integrity and continuity of individual lineage?" Ray 2002: 68.

unnecessary conflict and even hostility engendered by this dispute provides a perfect example of why responsible interpreters must not ignore or gloss over differences between interpretive frameworks. Though U Paṇḍita and the Dalai Lama may use cognate Pāḷi and Sanskrit terms, such as *nibbāna* and *nirvāṇa*, to refer to the goal(s) of their respective traditions, such masters of both theory and practice not only define these terms very differently, but specifically assert that the other's tradition does not accomplish the final purpose of their own. If so, can we responsibly dismiss their statements by teaching and practicing as if the goal of Dzogchen and the goal of *satipaṭṭhāna* are one and the same? What if they are not?

By reducing various traditions to the vocabulary and subjects that they have in common, we seriously risk missing the point of each. A tradition gets its explanatory power, its ability to inspire and to guide, not so much from the information it focuses on but from the principles by which it interprets the evidence at hand. Various vocabulary and ideas are related to one another and tied together by these hermeneutical principles. Such an interpretive framework is the genome carried wherever the seeds of a tradition are sown, its source.[37]

If a tradition is indeed defined not by its subjects but by its hermeneutic principles, then we need to take care not to seize on superficial similarities. If we pluck enough statements from any

37 While I do draw here on Michel Foucault's idea of "discourse," my description of vocabulary connected by hermeneutical principles puts less emphasis on power relations in order to focus more on the process of interpretation. The two are intimately related, however; which renderings are considered authentic depends largely on who is authorized as an interpreter. Foucault apparently understood that if one assumes no logic to be universal, tradition is the only means of legitimation. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, "The Discourse on Language," Foucault 1982 begins by recognizing any beginning as artificial; he concludes and completes his own argument by referring respectfully to his teachers' works, and to the intellectual lineage which preceded them. Implicit here is the understanding of authenticity as a function of the return to the source, which Steiner articulates so well.

two traditions, eventually some of these will begin to sound very similar. However, other statements could just as well be picked out of these same contexts, ones that would sound as if they were in sharp disagreement. Goldstein's exploration of *One Dharma* arose out of personal experience with this latter problem: stark differences between the definitions of freedom given by different traditions. This is why the principle that "philosophical concepts are only descriptions of experience, and not the experience itself" is listed first and foremost in Goldstein's hermeneutic.[38] In order to understand what any particular tradition means by its vocabulary, then, we must examine the framework of assumptions and values in which these ideas are employed.

This is an approach evidenced in a number of Theravādin works. The commentary on one *Abhidhamma* text makes clear that it is not the "expression" or "words" (*vacanā*) which are the "measure" ("standard, authority": *pamāṇa*), but rather the purpose or "meaning" (*attho*) that defines a text.

> ...the logical term, then, is in this school not the words, for which synonyms could be substituted, but the principle they refer to, the meaning; their logic is a logic of meaning, of principles, not of words...[39]

Almost all of the traditions grouped under the name 'Buddhism' do have in common certain vocabulary: 'Buddha', 'non-self', and 'skillful means', for instance. However, such terms are defined very differently depending on the very different hermeneutical principles of the various traditions, which is one reason I have suggested that the concept 'Buddhism' is

38 Goldstein 2002: 5, "Four basic principles, or understandings, lie at the heart of *One Dharma*: first, that philosophical concepts are only descriptions of experience, and not the experience itself; second, that mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom weave together as the essential strands of a nonsectarian path of practice; third, that what is called in Buddhism 'the two truths' – the relative and ultimate perspectives of reality – together provide a framework for holding divergent points of view; and, last, that the mind of nongrasping is the essential unifying experience of freedom."

39 Warder 2000: 311, referring to the commentary on the Yamaka, {Pañcappakaraṇa,58}.

misleading. I also know that "hearing accomplished masters from different traditions talk about liberation in very different ways, each with descriptions that were verified in their own experience" has caused serious doubt and indecision for a number of practitioners.[40] Likewise, in my own work interpreting for interviews at *satipaṭṭhāna* retreats, I have seen Burmese teachers caution a number of long-time practitioners that their practice was being subtly compromised by trying achieve a particular state of mind: rather applying non-judgemental awareness to whatever was arising, these students were (mostly unconsciously) carrying over Dzogchen practices that attempt to cultivate a calm and spacious attention. Some of these students saw for themselves the error of trying to take both of these approaches at the same time and then realized more fully the value of pure *satipaṭṭhāna*; others were not able to even temporarily put aside the habits they had cultivated doing other practices. Most of the students Steven Smith has come into contact with over twenty years of teaching find more confusion than compatibility between their experiences in different traditions.[41] If so, are understandings from different 'Buddhist' traditions really as unified as Stephen Batchelor asserts?

> I'm finding more and more that my understanding of these different schools is beginning – and I emphasize beginning – to resolve itself into an integral vision. The different practices and ideas are sufficiently compatible – they are, after all, rooted in the same source – to complement one another quite naturally.[42]

I do not question Batchelor's own "integral vision," but I cannot help but wonder to what degree all these "different practices and ideas" really are "rooted in the same source." I have discussed how different 'Buddhist' schools, such as the Theravāda, the Prajñaparamita, and the Pure Land, came to

40 Goldstein 2002: 157.

41 Steven Smith, commenting on a draft of *Strong Roots*, April 2003.

42 Batchelor 2002: 55.

operate from disparate philosophical frameworks.[43] This is further evidenced by an allegory from the Mahāyāna "Lotus Sūtra," where the Buddha cajoles reckless children from a burning house by promising them various toys according to their particular desires. The toy vehicles the Buddha offers are compared to the various vehicles of 'Buddhism', and when the children come out of the house, the Buddha gives them only the Great Vehicle, the 'Mahāyāna'. Richard Gombrich suggests that

> the text's use of metaphor and punning is very much in the tradition of the Buddha's style of argument found in the Pali Canon; but I believe that the application of the concept 'skill in means' to saying something untrue, albeit with the noblest motives, is an innovation.[44]

The "Lotus Sūtra" also introduced an approach called "One Vehicle," which held that "the only final vehicle is the One Vehicle to Perfect Buddhahood. *All* will eventually become Buddhas – the doctrine of the three vehicles was in reality nothing more than the Buddha's skillful means."[45] According to this philosophical framework practitioners cannot gain liberation except after practicing for countless lifetimes to discover the path of awakening for themselves in a given lifetime and teach it to others. In contrast, Theravādin teachings past and present hold out the possibility of different paths appropriate for different practitioners: those who hear the teachings of the Buddha and practice for full awakening and an end to suffering in their present life as well as those who vow to practice as long as it takes to be born as a perfected Buddha who can teach *Dhamma-Vinaya* to a generation without it.[46] For instance, Sayadaw U

43 Please see the discussion on p.47.

44 Gombrich 1996: 69, continues, "Let me hasten to add that I do not intend this observation to be pejorative. My own ethical opinion is that lying is justified if it achieves a great good, such as saving life. I am making a factual point about how Buddhist doctrine developed."

45 Williams 2001: 147.

46 See for instance Ratnayaka 1984, a well researched article on "The Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravāda," demonstrating that the bodhisattva path is evident in both the ancient texts and modern practices of Theravādins.

Paṇḍita's "emphasis on heroic effort is joined with a joyous confidence that liberation is possible in this very life."[47] The Pure Land school also employs 'Buddhist' vocabulary, but it sees a contradiction between the doctrine of non-self and the idea of making effort for one's own awakening. Instead, Hōnen advises, "Just call the name and you will be saved by Amida."[48] Such disparate statements can perhaps be reconciled, but only by appreciating the vast differences between the interpretive frameworks they each came from.

If a single historical individual were responsible for all the statements made by the 'Buddha' in the "Lotus Sūtra" as well in the Pāḷi texts, he would appear to have been rather confused – or at least fickle – about his moral and philosophical framework. If we stay within a coherent body of texts such as the Pāḷi Nikāyas, however, we find the Buddha and his disciples speaking with a remarkably consistent style and set of principles. It seems much more useful and respectful to speak of 'the Buddha of the Nikāya Pāḷi texts', 'the Buddha of the Prajñaparamita', or 'the Buddha of the East Asian Lotus Sūtra', than to attribute all these disparate, even contradictory teachings to a single source.

My argument is not that we need verify which particular statements were made by a specific individual named Siddhattha Gotama in northern India twenty-five hundred years ago in order to dismiss the rest; this would be an impossible task even if it were desirable. Likewise, the distinction between 'early' and 'late' 'Buddhism' is not really so important if we follow the ancient Indian approach to history as cyclical. I am suggesting a different

Ratnayaka also shows that the arahant path culminates in the same unselfish awakening as that of a *sammasambuddha*, and that both teach the path to others. The monk who preceded Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa as abbot of Kyaswa Monastery in the Sagaing Hills of Burma himself took the *bodhisatta* vow (he put off his own enlightenment, vowing to practice the perfections in order to be born as a *sammāsambuddha*).

47 Goldstein 1993b: 7.

48 Quoted by Williams 2001: 271-275, from Yui-en, *Tabbisho* (Kyoto: Higashi Honganji, 1961), 3-4.

type of distinction: that if certain contemporary traditions operate from substantially different hermeneutical frameworks, we need to respect and appreciate the integrity of each, their "autonomous virtues."[49] By the same token, where certain teachings and discussions and social practices operate from nearly identical principles, we need to honor and not violate their internal coherence as a tradition.

Therefore, I seriously question the value Goldstein places on a "unified theory of Dharma."[50]

> A wise cross-fertilization of spiritual practices can only deepen and broaden our understanding. It will foster not only tolerance, but also genuine respect and unity, as we each find from the great treasure-house of Dharma those teachings that benefit ourselves and others.[51]

It is true that 'cross-fertilization' sometimes results in offspring endowed with hybrid vigor, but mules are sterile as well as strong; any tradition must continue to be transmitted to new generations of practitioners if it is to survive. Depending on the wisdom and skill of those doing it, 'cross-fertilization of spiritual practices' could 'deepen and broaden our understanding' in some cases, but in others it might result in widespread confusion and doubt. Moreover, unifying various understandings from diverse 'Buddhist' traditions does not necessarily foster genuine respect, tolerance, or understanding. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes this point eloquently regarding the diversity of religious traditions.

> True tolerance in religion involves the capacity to admit differences as real and fundamental, even as profound and unbridgeable, yet at the same time to respect the rights of those who follow a religion different from one's own (or no religion at all) to continue to do so without resentment, disadvantage or hindrance.[52]

49 Steiner 1998: 318. I am drawing as well here from Cantwell Smith's admirable approach to 'cumulative traditions', discussed in "Interpreting History."

50 Goldstein 2002: 4.

51 Goldstein 2002: 6.

52 Bodhi 1993.

Given the profound differences described above between the traditions of the Pāḷi, the "Lotus Sutra," and the Pure Land, Bhikkhu Bodhi's argument for respecting diversity is just as applicable to the differences between the approaches and goals of these traditions as it is to their respective differences from the Anglican church or the world-view of Western Science.

To define anything, we must exclude everything that it is not. Even if we were to include all 'religious' traditions in *One Dharma*, we would still be denying (correctly, I think) the effectiveness of farming or music making or surfing at achieving the goal of the Pāḷi. Such an approach is no less exclusive than judging the Mahāsi tradition to be the only path to awakening; the anointed group is just bigger. We need not priveledge any particular goal or means; farming is effective at achieving many goals other than that of the Pāḷi. We can avoid the conceit of judging practices on principles that are not their own by acknowledging success in any tradition as that tradition defines it. Instead of judging whether a particular Tibetan or Burmese teaching is authentic 'Buddhism' according to our own particular definition, we can follow Wilfred Cantwell Smith in using "the genetic bond of continuity, and... the social one of cohesion," as criteria for inclusion in a particular tradition.[53]

Both continuity and cohesion are important in defining a teaching lineage. Tree species such as apple and orange manifest in living, reproducing organisms because the seeds of each species inherit genetic principles from ancestors that had the awesome ability to organize raw materials into generation after generation of life. To insist that apple trees and orange trees produce different fruit is not to deny or dismiss that fact that both are sweet, nor even that they came from a common ancestor. In one discussion, Goldstein told me that *One Dharma* is concerned with the similarities on the 'molecular level' between the teachings of Dzogchen and Vipassanā, Zen and the Thai

53 Smith 1978: 167, discussed on p.62.

Forest traditions; that is, he finds fundamental parallels between the ways the various practices of these different groups affect human beings. I pointed out to him that while the biochemical processes that occur in an apple tree and an orange tree might be nearly identical on the molecular level, this does not mean that the branches and leaves of an orange can be combined with the roots and trunk of an apple to form a viable tree; the organs of each have evolved to play a particular role in a particular context. This recognition is not pejorative to the sugar content of any species, rather it allows for a skillful approach to cultivating and maintaining each genetic lineage that will indeed result in sweet fruit in the present generation and in future ones.

If modern Tibetan and Burmese schools are descended from a common Indian ancestor, since then these two populations have undergone much mutation and mixing with other traditions, from the ancient animistic practices of Burma to the Vedic ideals that inform the Tantrayāna. The question is whether various parts of two or more such modern traditions can now be synthesized to produce teachings that would indeed enable generations of practitioners to gain full awakening. There are, of course, certain closely related varieties of apples that can be grafted together to produce fruit for at least one generation.

I see a fundamental difference between the approach explicitly attempted in *Strong Roots* and the ideal implicit in 'unified theories' of 'Buddhist' practice; this disagreement centers on what would be necessary – and who would be qualified – to define *One Dharma* that would be viable and effective as a tradition of awakening across different historical contexts.[54] To achieve that goal of unification, someone must decide which

54 As quoted above, Goldstein 2002: 4, writes that "When we step outside the safe bounds of the various individual traditions, each consistent within itself, we need to acknowledge the exploratory nature of a unified theory of Dharma, continually testing it against both our experience and the teachings as they have been passed down over thousands of years." Again, this begs the question, which teachings? The results of our 'tests' can only be as consistent and coherent as the set of teachings we test them against.

hermeneutical principles to use in selecting various components to form a tradition that would effectively inspire and guide generation after generation of practitioners all the way to the end of the path; to take a particularly central question, how would the end be defined? In the absence of a *sammāsambuddha*, perhaps a council of people who had themselves traversed the entire path of awakening could competently design a coherent, consistent, and effective means of transmission from pieces of the various traditions alive today. As Sayadaw U Paṇḍita pointed out to me regarding *One Dharma*, though, if the *arahats* present at the Second Council attempted and failed to resolve the differences that stand between the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna, what chance do we have today? Without such guidance, in any case, I am very skeptical about our ability to synthesize *One Dharma* that is 'good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end'.[55]

To The Source

Seeing the unique strength of each tradition as more than the sum of its parts is what will foster genuine respect between practitioners of the various Vipassanā groups and students of Dzogchen or Kabbalah. With this approach, ancient teachings would be made relevant and powerful for modern practitioners by presenting and understanding them within their respective native frameworks. Burmese meditation masters such as U Paṇḍita draw on the teachings of the Buddha's senior disciples and fifth century commentators such as Buddhaghosa, as well as nineteenth century practitioners and scholars of the Theravāda; such textual knowledge, when combined with personal experience in the practice, results in potent and effective

55 "*te dhammā ādikalyāṇā majjhekalyāṇā pariyosānakalyāṇā*," e.g. (A.VIII.2){IV,151}.

guidance. Not to offer American students the wisdom transmitted and accumulated over thousands of years of Theravādin tradition would be a great loss.

Steiner provides a cogent argument for a kind of interpretation that "makes the autonomous virtues of the original more precisely visible," and "infers that the source-text possesses potentialities... as yet unrealized by itself"; this is the fourth step of his 'hermeneutic motion'. At best, modern American renditions fulfill potential latent in the traditional teachings but perhaps unrealized in contexts such as Burma. This new fulfillment can occur when modern scientific and social understandings extend the accessibility and application of ancient practices. While women's potential has been neglected for thousands of years in nearly all the Asian traditions, female meditation teachers and scholars are playing a major role in the emerging American Buddhism(s). Academics and health professionals in psychology have found value in practices descended from the Buddha. And, of course, many people who would not have had access to the teachings in Asia have found greater or lesser degrees of release from suffering – according to their own accounts – because the teachings are being offered in an American context.

Where the interpreter cannot receive all that emanates from the original, responsible renditions direct inquiry into the depths of the source material itself. When questioned on matters beyond their own experience, well-trained meditation masters can refer to the time-tested interpretation of a coherent tradition. In this way, the source is given credit and a chance to fulfill its potential. Steiner's ideal of "authentic translation... is one of total counterpart or re-petition – an asking again."[56] If we are interpreting from a coherent set of hermeneutical principles, when difficulties are encountered, we have a source to return to. Whether we need interpret a particular term into English or to

56 Steiner 1978: 318.

make the practice of morality relevant to modern Americans, we can bounce our questions off the Pāḷi discourses or the Commentaries. We must remember, though, that the answers will only be as coherent and consistent as the source from which we are operating. Neither 'Buddhism' nor Goldstein's *One Dharma* are viable as traditions of awakening, to my mind, because they encompass too many disparate philosophical frameworks to give clear guidance.

If my argument above is cogent, every instance of understanding and analysis is guided by some set of principles, though these may often be implicit and unexamined. In order to understand various practices, one necessarily judges them on the basis of principles either newly invented or derived from somewhere, be it the Western Scientific paradigm, popular American middle-class values, or the ancient Pāḷi texts. An author's hermeneutic is evident in the subjects and evidence selected and the conclusions arrived at in every paragraph, not just in a few introductory remarks explicitly addressing the philosophical approach. This is why my model of operating from and returning to a living source requires that the interpretive framework used to judge various human activities be explicitly acknowledged throughout.

My ideal of authentic transmission requires that the interpreter bring out the original strengths of the source – by presenting its ideas in the context of their native hermeneutic framework – and render these messages accessible and applicable to new audiences and new issues. While these two projects might seem contradictory, I have consistently found the Theravādin interpretive principles to be the most effective way of framing teachings from Burmese meditation masters or the Pāḷi texts in order that they resonate with modern sensibilities. In particular, the understanding of a 'world of experience' in a continuing process of dependent co-arising seems to render the Buddha's teachings on action and its results, on rebirth and how to end the

cycle of suffering, sensible and even attractive to modern Americans. I have found my work interpreting the Theravādin analysis greatly rewarding, in part because these teachings seem to resonate with such a wide range of people, from those with a great deal of familiarity with the tradition to those with next to none. Such renderings are potent precisely because the genius they convey is not my own.

If "all communication 'interprets' between privacies," though, how can we know the author's intentions, how can we be sure that the original actually had the 'autonomous virtues' our interpretation emphasizes or the "potentialities" we try to realize?[57] I have discussed ways that the metaphors and frameworks of different languages evidence a great deal of "Common Humanity." Statements from the Pāḷi can activate very similar associations in modern Americans and ancient Indians because of such common human language patterns. By examining the respective human contexts we can evaluate to what degree the virtues that made a particular teaching tradition relevant and useful in the past are indeed the same as the virtues that people today appreciate. Thus, interpreters can try to bring out the strengths of a source and fulfill its potentials with a great deal of confidence that these correspond closely to the intention of the original.

In the case of *Dhamma-Vinaya* practice, there is a further check of authenticity. According to the Theravādin understanding of existence discussed in the chapter on "Insight," sense experience is non-conceptual, as are its various qualities, which can include the delusion that allows the cycle of suffering to continue or the 'clear seeing' that ends it. The presence or absence of suffering can thus be known at the level of sensation. The way this understanding is then interpreted into a practitioner's thoughts about what is happening depends on the individual's language, culture, and lineage. However, discussions

57 Steiner 1978: 207.

of mindfulness meditation by ancient and modern teachers use common human language patterns to point to the 'direct knowledge' of the cessation of suffering.[58] If this kind of knowledge is dependent simply on sense awareness, and not on culture and personality, it would have arisen in the same way for ancient Indians that it does for modern Americans.

According to the Pāḷi discourses, no one except a *sammāsambuddha* can verify another practitioner's attainments with surety.[59] Nonetheless, an individual can most definitely be aware of suffering in his or her own life; if there is less grasping and more 'letting go' in one's stream of consciousness, that is quite evident as well. That is precisely why the Buddha in the Pāḷi describes the *Dhamma* he teaches as *sandiṭṭhiko*, "directly visible."[60] An individual can be sure that a particular teaching is an authentic interpretation of *Dhamma-Vinaya* if applying the prescribed practices the 'taste of release' not only in the beginning and in the middle, but also in the end. However, this most definitely does not imply that any practices that are good in the beginning and middle of a particular individual's practice can be synthesized or 'cross-fertilized' to create an authentic and effective tradition of awakening across generations. If my argument above for "A Return" is cogent, those of us less than fully awakened must rely on and maintain the coherence and consistence of particular lineage of transmission from people who have 'done what had to be done', employing their particular definition of the goal and the best means to reach it.

Even for those who know for themselves the practices that lead to awakening, strong craving or aversion can often lead practitioners to delude themselves and get stuck "either in

58 We find, for instance, throughout the Pāḷi the phrase "*cetovimuttiṁ paññāvimuttiṁ diṭṭheva dhamme sayaṁ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharati*," 'one enters into and remains in mental release and wisdom release, having realized them for oneself through direct knowledge in the visible world (i.e. before death)'.

59 E.g. A.VI.44 {III,347ff}.

60 E.g. A.III.54 {I,156}, trans. Ñāṇapoṇika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

suffering or in a conditioned kind of happiness," as Joseph Goldstein puts it, expressing his appreciation for U Paṇḍita's guidance.[61] This is why a practitioner needs to return to the source again and again, not just in the first stages of practice, but all the way to 'full awakening', as one discourse from the Pāḷi makes clear. In a discussion with a promising young Brahman scholar, Kāpaṭika Bhāradvāja, the Buddha lays out the 'hermeneutic motion' through which a novice approaches the teachings and comes to an authentic understanding of them. Prompted by the young Brahman's inquiries, the Buddha describes the initial awakening to truth and the "final arrival at truth."[62] Kāpaṭika is intrigued.

> "But what factor, Master Gotama, does most for the final arrival at truth?"
>
> "Pushing onward, Bhāradvāja, does most for the final arrival at truth... If one did not push onward, one would not finally arrive at truth. And because one pushes on, one does finally arrive at truth. Thus, pushing onward does most for the final arrival at truth."
>
> "Contemplation does most for pushing onward... Daring endeavor does most for contemplation... Eagerness does most for daring endeavor... Satisfaction on scrutinizing the teachings does most for eagerness... Exploring the meaning does most for satisfaction on scrutinizing the teachings... Bearing the teachings in mind does most for exploring the meaning... Hearing the teachings does most for bearing the teachings in mind... Giving ear does most for hearing the teachings... Being in attendence does most for giving ear... Going to see [a teacher] does most for being in attendence... Having confidence does most for going to see [a teacher]... If confidence [in a teacher] did not arise, one would not go to see [that person]. Because confidence arises, one goes to see [that person]. Thus, confidence does most for going to see [a teacher]."[63]

61 Goldstein 1993c: 22, quoted more fully on p.221.

62 As Ñāṇamoli Thera translates the Caṅkī Sutta (M.95){II,164ff}.

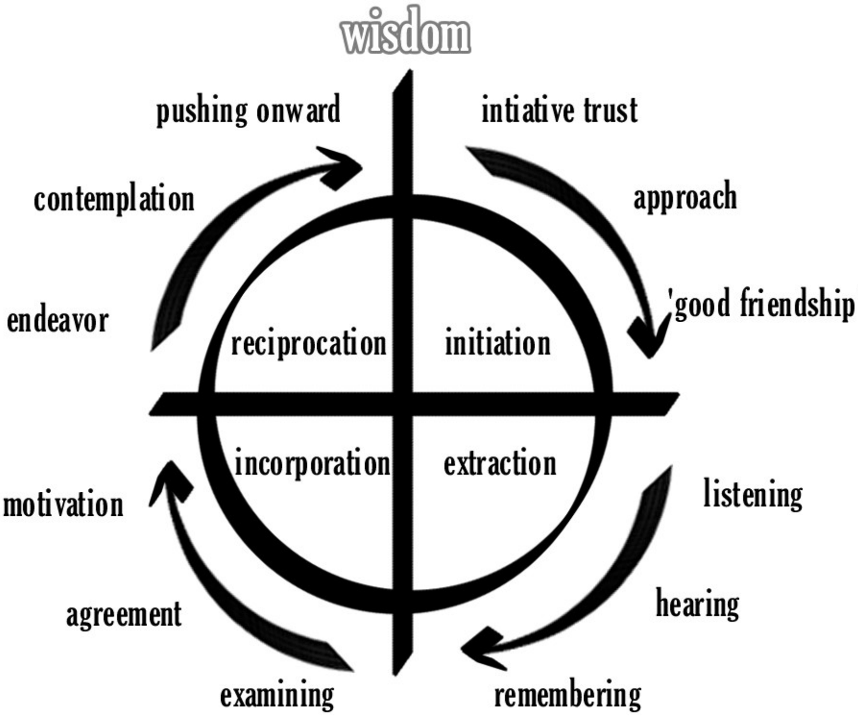
63 Caṅkī Sutta (M.95){II,174ff}. My translation draws in a number of places from the translations by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi) and by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. First of all, Ñā ṇamoli'sgloss of "final arrival at

This discourse presents the process of developing wisdom in fourteen steps, a refined version of the 'hermeneutic motion'. As does Steiner, the Buddha apparently recognizes an "initiative trust" as prerequisite. Only when this kind of faith is present will one approach a teacher and get the opportunity encounter the teachings. By listening carefully, really hearing what is said, and absorbing the teachings into memory, people begin to grasp what is involved in intensive practice, they make Steiner's second motion of appropriation. Through exploring the meaning of what they have heard, and reflecting on this in light of their own experience of suffering, individuals gain the motivation to investigate the solution. Committed practice is the best way of reciprocating the gift of the teachings, as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita often says. The assimilation of *Dhamma-Vinaya* into the context of one's own being culminates as one "realises with the body the supreme truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom."[64]

The process of liberation from suffering, though, does not reach completion with this "awakening to truth." Rather, based on what is now firm conviction in the value of the practice, the practitioner returns to the teacher and the teachings, respectfully and attentively, listening and digesting, developing inspiration, investigation, and energy. "The final arrival at truth... lies in the repetition, development, and cultivation of

truth" captures the critical ambiguity of *saccānuppatti*; *ānupatti* can mean "attained, received, got to, [or] reached" as in the phrase "having reached old age" according to Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "ānupatti," 37, and since there is no article 'the' in Pāḷi, Thanissaro Bhikkhu's rendering, "final attainment of the truth," seems overstated, and perhaps unintentionally absolutist. Therefore, I have followed Ñāṇamoli's gloss here. Secondly, Ñāṇamoli's rendering of the young brahmin's queries, "But what, Master Gotama, is most helpful...?" closely follows the syntax of the original Pāḷi, "*...pana, bho gotama, katamo dhammo bahukāro*?," and neatly reflects its conversational style, so my own attempt bears a great resemblence to the Venerable Ñāṇamoli's. Finally, I found much resonance with Thansissaro's glosses for the twelve progressive properties, so although I have rerendered them from the Pāḷi, in each case differing from Thanissaro in at least a few details, his inspiration is nonetheless evident in a number of places.

64 Caṅkī Sutta (M.95){II,173}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.



these same things."[65] So the discourse describes authentic deep transmission.

The approach developed here for the analysis of a particular Theravādin teaching draws on the tradition itself. Three analytical tools have been offered in this section, three concepts used in the Pāḷi to present the role of the Buddha's teachings in the world, three ideas that the Theravāda has used to understand itself:

1. The practice of *Dhamma-Vinaya*, the 'Doctrine and Discipline'.

2. The process by which social context defines this practice, and by which the practice shapes the human cultures it touches, namely through *paṭicca samuppāda*, dependent co-arising.

65 Caṅkī Sutta (M.95){II,174}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.

3. The continuity of transmission of the practice across historical contexts: the *Buddha-Sāsana*, the living tradition of study, practice, and realization.

Thus we discern the transmission of the 'Doctrine and Discipline', which arises together with and dependent on present and past human context, as a person respectfully approaches, thoroughly digests, and persistently applies the teachings presented by a 'cumulative tradition' of scholarship and practice. This cycle of understanding, initiated by faith in a body of teachings, reaches its authentic completion through faithfulness to that source.

Part Two



Front Gate of the Mahāsi Sāsana Yiektha Meditation Center
Rangoon, Burma

From Burma to Barre

an instance of deep transmission

What about the practice taught by the Mahāsi Sayadaw inspires Americans to begin and to continue assimilating it into their own lives? How have different philosophical, psychological, and social contexts shaped the teachings in Burma and in the United States? For people at the Insight Meditation Society, what is the practice?

From Burma to Barre

The Mahāsi Sayadaw propagated his version of mindfulness practice in a time of rapid social change, and his was part of a larger movement of Theravādins towards meditation. The Buddha's discourses in the Pāḷi frequently prescribe personal development through concentration and insight, as we shall see. Later in the Theravādin tradition, however, meditation seems to have been much less valued than Pāḷi scholarship and social rituals. Beginning around the first century C.E. in Sri Laṅka, there is evidence of a debate over the relative merits of scholarship and *vipassanā* practice. With royal and popular support, those dismissing meditation practice seem to have gained the upper hand by the fifth century C.E.[1] There may have been episodes in

1 Threatened by civil war, and perhaps by the popularity of early Mahāyāna teachings, monks in Sri Laṅka began writing down the Pāḷi texts beginning in the first century C.E. This led to a new conception of scholarship, and a debate between monks advocating practice and those advocating scriptural study and preaching, which the scholars apparently won. Beginning around the fifth century C.E., Pāḷi literature makes a division between the vocation of scholarship, *gantha-dhura*, and that of insight, *vipassanā-dhura*. The Commentaries' allusions to these two make clear not only that by that time insight practices were deemed less important, but also that scholarship of *Abhidhamma*, the complex analysis of mind and matter, took priority over the *Sutta* and *Vinaya* texts. It seems that in Sri Laṅka monks well-versed not only in the Pāḷi texts but also in Vedic "languages, arts, sciences, history, law" and medicine won royal favor, and thus decisively influenced the later Theravāda. "One cannot help believing that it was 'scholarship,' the power

which regional lineages of the Theravāda returned to an emphasis on meditation; nonetheless, at the time of the British invasion in the nineteenth century, the Theravādin establishment in Burma was focused on textual scholarship and social functions, almost to the exclusion of mindfulness practice.

Some American mindfulness practitioners are aware that lay people in Burma rarely engaged in intensive meditation until figures like the Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) and the Mahāsi Sayadaw advocated lay practice.[2] Less well known is the fact that the Theravādin establishment at that time, at least the urban factions that dominated religious politics and scholarship, did not strongly encourage mindfulness practice even for ordained monks and nuns. Most were primarily scholars, though some did engage in intensive absorption practices.[3] According to Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, when he was young, more people in Burma "just studied the texts... These days, there are many people who study and many people who practice deeply."[4]

Apparently a number of nineteenth century monks were inspired by the meditation techniques collected from the Pāḷi discourses in one seminal text, Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*. Scholar-practitioners such as the The-Lon Sayadaw and the Ledi Sayadaw are said to have put this textual guidance into practice without personal teachers to guide them in mindfulness practice.[5] The Buddha and the classical commentators who

of intelligence and knowledge, that enabled the *dhammakathika bhikkhus* to establish their point of view defeating the *paṃsukūlika bhikkhus*, though the latter were in conformity with the fundamental teachings of Buddhism." Rahula 1974: 26-33.

2 The Ledi Sayadaw was an eminent scholar as well as an influential advocate of mindfulness practice. He seems to have been one of the first monks in the modern Theravāda to encourage lay people to engage in intensive meditation practice.

3 Absorption practices are discussed on p.235.

4 Paṇḍita 2003: 5.

5 The Mya Taung Sayadaw U Dhammaloka of the Sagaing Hills, himself a very evidently happy person, and a practitioner in a lineage descended from the The-Lon Sayadaw via the Shan Galay Kyun Sayadaw, related his view of the

collated his teachings were themselves human practitioners; nonetheless, it remarkable that these modern scholar-practitioners were able, solely with guidance meditated through the texts, to found lineages that have led many thousands of twentieth-century practitioners to achieve – according to their own reports – significant levels of liberation from suffering.

The Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw U Nārada (1868-1955) was one monk who became interested in applying his theoretical knowledge from the Pāḷi, but mindfulness practice was apparently so rare in nineteenth century Burma that he had to travel to the wilderness of the Sagaing Hills for guidance. There he found a recluse called the Aletawya Sayadaw, who had practiced with the same The-Lon Sayadaw mentioned above.[6] U Nārada inquired of this reclusive monk how to achieve the goal of the teachings that he had studied so extensively. The Aletawya Sayadaw reportedly asked U Nārada in return why he was looking outside of the Buddha's teachings, since they so clearly point out the path of mindfulness as the way to achieve awakening.[7]

The *satipaṭṭhāna* practice taught by the Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw to the Mahāsi Sayadaw and others did not require extensive tranquility preparation previous to insight practice. Some have suggested that this system gained popularity because lay people did not have the time to devote to the scholastic and absorption practices traditionally engaged in by ordained renunciates.[8] In any case, the recent emphasis on lay practice in Burma and Sri Laṅka coincided with the imposition of British colonialism and European ideals, most notably Protestantism, with its ethic of unmediated, personal religion. Based on such evidence, scholars such as Robert Sharf argue "that the emphasis on meditative experience in Buddhism may well be of recent provenance, a product of twentieth-century reforms inspired in

history of these lineages to a group of us during a discussion, January 2003.

6 Sīlānanda 1982: 35-40.

7 Ñāṇapoṇika 1988: 85.

8 Sharf 1995: 255-6, echoes this widespread understanding.

part by Occidental models."[9] According to Sharf, modern Vipassanā teachings' focus on the 'experience of insight' is derived mostly from sources other than the Theravadin tradition. He takes this tendency on the part of an Asian tradition as a type of self-defense against "the scourge of cultural relativism" brought on by extensive contact with foreign cultures.

> By privileging private spiritual experience Buddhist apologists sought to secure the integrity of Buddhism by grounding it in a trans-cultural, trans-historical reality immune to the relativist critique.[10]

It is not only modern students and practitioners of religion, however, who have put forward the idea of direct knowing unaffected by cultural variables. The chapter on "Insight" cites a number of Pāḷi discourses that advocate a kind of direct seeing of sense experience not determined by conceptual understanding.[11] In the texts, the Buddha does not attempt to legitimize the goal or the practice by appealing to "institutional or scriptural authority"; there was none to which he could refer, of course. If so, Sharf must admit that modern apologists were not the first to privilege "private spiritual experience... by grounding it in a trans-cultural, trans-historical reality."[12]

---

9 Sharf 1995: 259.

10 Sharf 1995: 268.

11 Please see the discussion on p.243.

12 Sharf 1995: 268. Sharf, 260, is very skeptical about taking terms such as 'concentration', 'insight', or 'realization' to refer to "clearly delimited 'experiences' shared by Buddhist practitioners." He marshals evidence to suggest that the recent emphasis on intensive individual mindfulness practice derives more from European Enlightenment ideals than from the source of Theravādin tradition. Sharf cites, for instance, Richard Gombrich's point that the idea of a 'meditation center' is a very recent one. Neither of these authors notice, however, that these centers fulfill many of the functions that early monasteries performed according to the accounts of the Pāḷi texts. Indeed, the centers of scholastic activity and social power occupied by monks in twentieth century Burma could not provide the quiet environment and competent guidance for meditation practice sought by renunciates at the time of the Buddha. If the definition of a 'monastery' or 'meditation center' is contextual, though the Buddha did not set up 'meditation centers' per se, he may well have set up institutions that

Sharf sees the ideal of direct knowing as precipitated mainly by the meeting of diverse cultural traditions. Certainly, taking certain doctrines as absolute truth becomes more problematic when one interacts with apparently sane and reasonable people who hold radically different world-views. Perhaps for this reason, many modern Americans do seem quite strongly relativist. Intriguingly, similar conditions seem to have been present when

---

performed many of the functions IMS does today.

Sharf conflates practice at the time of the Buddha with later Theravādin tradition. Likewise, his account of the transformation of the modern Theravāda in Asia towards an innovative, anti-authoritarian emphasis on direct experience to the exclusion of theoretical study is overstated, and actually much more true of contemporary teaching in America than of the Mahāsi tradition in Burma. Moreover, Sharf employs a Western conception of knowing that conflates intellectual interpretation and the direct knowing of sense consciousness, which are clearly differentiated in the Pāḷi texts. Thus he marshals some solid evidence and clever reasoning to come to conclusions that are quite unsound, and – if my argument for a return to the source is cogent – quite disrespectful. When we draw the crucial distinction between the early teachings and later Theravādin scholasticism, we find that Sharf's evidence does not support his suggestion, 259, that "the emphasis on meditative experience in Buddhism may well be of recent provenance." See for instance Dhp.XXIV:353, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, where the Buddha asks, "having fully known on my own,/ to whom should I point as my teacher?" I have cited in the following chapters a number of modern authorities as well as Pāḷi texts attesting to the fact that the early Buddhist tradition had a strong emphasis on concentrated mindfulness practice. Likewise, when we draw the crucial distinction between sense consciousness and conceptual understanding, the idea that insight or realization is determined by a certain doctrinal or cultural context appears rather confused.

For the project of examining the Vipassanā movement, Sharf's assumptions have very little to recommend them. Especially in the chapter on "Insight," I present reasons why the Theravādin understanding of reality is a much more suitable basis from which to interpret the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path. This perspective does not deny that every aspect of teaching and practice is contextual; rather, it asserts that the kind of clear seeing that brings liberation from suffering depends not on any particular conceptual or cultural determination, but simply on a stream of sensation. Indeed, in addressing deep transmission above, I suggested that we might fruitfully analyze the 'Doctrine and Discipline' as dependently co-arising with its human contexts in a continuing process of interpretation and

the Pāḷi discourses were composed, with their emphasis on the cultivation of direct knowing, *abhiññā*.

The following chapters make note of many similarities between the social context that the Buddha taught in and that of IMS. A few conditions stand out: like modern America with its global connections and social 'melting pot', northern India in the last millenium B.C.E. was the meeting place of a number of radically different world-views, as waves of Āryan settlers gradually integrated into areas previously occupied by hunter-gatherer societies and other republican communities. The period around 500 B.C.E. also saw the rise of a class of merchants and small landowners and of urban communities; recent centuries have featured similar trends in Western societies.[13] Many of the Buddha's followers were drawn from the newly arisen middle class; practitioners of the Eightfold Noble Path constituted a small part of society, and not a very insular one. Likewise, American Vipassanā practitioners have the majority of their social interactions with people who have no allegiance to this particular vocabulary and value system. 'Theravāda' or 'Buddhism' for these practitioners is not a national or ethnic identity, as it has been for certain Southeast Asians. Based on this evidence, we might make some interesting speculations. Perhaps an emphasis on meditative experience arises in times of rapid social change predicated in part by multi-culturalism. In contrast, relatively homogenous and isolated societies where religious establishments such as the Theravāda become a crucial part of national identity tend to emphasize institutionalized scholarship and social ritual.

The establishment religion of Burma has nonetheless been able to offer teachings that the anti-establishment spiritual

transmission. Such an approach will result in an understanding of the similarities and differences between what constitutes the practice in Barre and in Burma, respectively, that is more authentic – in the sense of interpreting various cultural ideas as much as possible on their own terms.

13 Warder 2000: 29-30.

seekers of 1970s America found novel and valuable. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita often repeats one of his students' remarks, calling *satipaṭṭhāna* "Burma's finest export." The Mahāsi Sayadaw came to IMS himself in 1979, at the invitation of early students such as Alan Clements. U Paṇḍita began coming to Barre in 1984, when Joseph Goldstein and others "knew him only by reputation as the successor to the Mahāsi Sayadaw," in the position of guiding teacher of the Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha.[14]

The collection of talks from U Paṇḍita's first trip to IMS has proven remarkably popular; three editions of *In This Very Life* have now been published. It is notable that these talks were interpreted by a Malaysian monk educated in the Anglo system, U Aggacitta, and heavily edited by an American student of U Paṇḍita's, Kate Wheeler. By emphasizing certain points and phrasing, Wheeler renders Sayadaw's message in quite a refined form, attractive to American sensibilities. This interpretation has greatly extended the original's potential and also made many of its autonomous virtues shine. It is quite an authentic rendition – in Steiner's sense – but significantly different in content and style from a literal interpretation of the talks.

In This Very Life has brought many foreign students to U Paṇḍita's centers. Given the vast literature in Burmese on mindfulness practice, it is remarkable that even a few educated Burmese have been introduced to *satipaṭṭhāna* through *In This Very Life*. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's words have guided, among others, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize for her courageous non-violent struggle for democracy in Burma. Gustaaf Houtman points out how

> It is interesting that Aung San Suu Kyi, like many Burmese intellectuals steeped in reading foreign literature, should come to familiarise herself with Burmese *vipassanā* traditions through the English medium whilst there is such vast literature on the subject in Burmese. This is indicative of the role of *vipassanā* at the interface with other countries, and it affirms the role of

14 Goldstein 1993b: 7.

> *vipassanā* centres as the only Burmese establishments to represent Burma abroad alongside the Burmese embassy.[15]

Because it is directed at a similar audience, *In This Very Life* resembles 'Dharma books' by American teachers much more closely than it does Burmese language publications on meditation. People who come to IMS are mostly lay people with the financial resources to take time for retreat. Especially in America "most seem to be middle class," but I observed a similar demographic at Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's centers in Burma, though one meditation instructor there disagreed with my assessment.[16] Uma Chakravarti suggests that in fact most of the Buddha's lay students were *gahapati*: merchants, bankers, and artisans.[17] In any case, the vast majority of contemporary American practitioners are educated, many with professional degrees. Most texts addressed to this context thus assume not only a certain sophistication of language, but also a particular set of sensibilities. Joseph Goldstein gives an interesting illustration of such assumptions at work. Being told by his teacher, Munindra-ji, that certain meditation subjects were suitable for intelligent people, and others for "stupid people,"

> I had an immediate, strong reaction to the categorization. Because of a certain middle-class, Western conditioning, I was offended that anyone would be considered stupid.
>
> It was freeing to learn that for spiritual practice there is no preference regarding intelligence.[18]

There are many cases like this one, where the traditional interpretation actually has something new and liberating to offer American culture. There are many other ways in which modern egalitarianism and free inquiry can revitalize the Burmese Theravādin presentation. All the senior teachers in the Mahāsi

15 Houtman 1999: 339.

16 Fronsdal 1998: 178. Cf. Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 237, in Sri Laṅka, "most meditators are middle class."

17 Chakravarti 1987: *passim*.

18 Goldstein 1993c: 6.

tradition that I have spoken with, Burmese monks as well as American lay people, have emphasized the importance of transmitting the Buddha's teachings in America and Europe. In the course of Western interpreters' attempts to accommodate the Greco-Judaic worldview, however, the understandings of the Pāḷi texts have been abridged in places and contorted in others. My suggestion is that a return to the hermeneutic principles of the Theravādin tradition, such as a concise presentation of the 'world of experience' as a continuing process of dependent co-arising, might not only render the teachings of the Pāḷi discourses even more acceptable to modern sensibilities, but also prove quite an explanatory and consistent account of human existence. This kind of reciprocity could extend the Theravāda's potential precisely by revealing its original strengths, doing justice to the source as well as greatly benefiting American practitioners.

The Mahāsi Sayadaw and his senior teaching disciples consistently refer to the Pāḷi texts for their description of the practice. They emphasize particularly the formulation given in the "Discourse Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion," reported as the Buddha's very first teaching:

> And what is the middle way realized by the ['One Thus Gone': the Buddha] that – producing vision, producing knowledge – leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to [*Nibbāna*]? Precisely this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.[19]

As presented in the Pāḷi texts, these eight factors constitute not a linear progression, but a continuing cycle of development, each advancing the next. Thus the initial factor of right view is

19 Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta (S.LVI.11){V,421}. I use Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation here, in part because his "producing vision... knowledge" accurately renders *cakkhukaraṇī ñāṇakaraṇī*, where Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation simply lists these states among those "led to," which the Pāḷi suffixes clearly differentiate: *upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya*. For instances of this text's prominence, note the title of Mahāsi 1980, *To Nibbāna via the Noble Eightfold Path*, echoed in that of Paṇḍita 1995, *On the Path of Freedom: A Mind of Wise Discernment and Openness.*

also the culmination of the practice. From the first, writes Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, an understanding of the process of suffering and the means to its end "must provide the impetus and the direction for our spiritual journey."[20] "The 'rightness' of right view and other factors of the path," according to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "carries the connotation not only of being correct, but also of being 'just right'."[21] By providing balanced guidance towards skillful conduct and concentrated mindfulness, right view reaches its culmination in the realization of full release, as the discussion in the "Anuggahita Sutta" makes clear.

> Tended with five factors, Bhikkhus, right view has the liberation of mind as its fruit, the liberation of mind its reward; it has the liberation of wisdom as its fruit, the liberation of wisdom as its reward. Which five?
>
> Here right view is tended with skillful conduct, tended with learning, tended with discussion, tended with tranquillity, tended with insight.[22]

This list of five interdependent functions is useful as a conceptual scheme with which to analyze practice in Barre. Modern retreat centers such as IMS provide a social context that supports and protects practitioners, much as monasteries might have at other times. For all members of the community, but

---

20 Paṇḍita 1993: 242ff., following M.117{III,71}. Bodhi 1991 gives a similar explanation in his introduction to *The Discourse on Right View*.

21 Thanissaro 1996: Part I, A, precedes this statement, "Just as a musical instrument should neither be too sharp nor too flat, the mind on the path has to find a balance between excessive energy and excessive stillness. At the same time, it must constantly watch out for the tendency for its energy to slacken in the same way that stringed instruments tend to go flat." Thus, this "musical analogy makes vivid the need for balance in meditative practice, a lesson that appears repeatedly in the texts," most explicitly at A.VI.55, but also at S.XLVIII.50, A.V.28, M.128, etc.

22 Anuggahita Sutta (A.V.25){III,20}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. The distinction between these two types of release was the subject of a debate between proponents of intellectual study and those of meditative application of the teachings beginning at the latest a few hundred years after the Buddha's death. Gombrich's discussion of this debate is cited on p.232.

especially for people on intensive retreat, IMS creates a "container" for personal practice.[23] To a greater or lesser degree, guidelines and peer support encourage skillful **conduct**, which allows concentration to develop. **Learning** from books, peers, and teachers can balance and correct a student's understanding of the practice. Likewise, during intensive retreat, structured **discussion** in interviews with meditation teachers is intended to support views that are 'just right' for the current situation, thereby balancing and correcting the remaining factors of the student's practice. The presence of all of these supports, as well as a quiet, clean, and peaceful environment, allows concentration of attention, and thus calm and **tranquility**, to develop.[24] According to Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, the establishment of concentrated mindfulness naturally, organically results in *vipassanā*, the way of seeing things just as they arise generally rendered in English as '**insight**'. As a practitioner progresses towards the culmination of right view, the 'awakening to truth', "each stage of insight eliminates a particular kind of wrong view or misconception about the nature of reality."[25]

A retreat center attempts to create the conditions for students to engage in skillful conduct as well as learning and discussion of the practice, in order to develop tranquility and insight. In each of these areas, we can observe George Steiner's hermeneutic cycle: only if people find some resonance between the presentation of the teachings and their own experience do they become interested and make a tentative approach, perhaps coming to hear a talk or participate in a retreat. As they listen, discuss, and apply the teachings, they appropriate certain understandings and practices from the tradition and assimilate them into their own lives, or not.

During his first trip to IMS in 1984, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita referred to the "Anuggahita Sutta" cited above, drawing from the

23 Michele McDonald often employs this analogy.

24 Please see the Glossary entry for *samatha* on p.293.

25 Paṇḍita 1993: 245.

Commentary an analogy that proves useful for framing the following discussion of transmission "From Burma to Barre."

> Vipassanā meditation is like planting a garden. We have the seed of clear and complete vision, which is the mindfulness with which we observe phenomena. In order to cultivate this seed, nurture the plant, and reap its fruit of transcendent wisdom, there are five protections to follow. These are the Five Protections, or the Five *Anuggahitas*.[26]

26 Paṇḍita 1993: 22, paraphrased from AA.V.25{III,229}. U Aggacitta's (?) choice of "protections" in the excerpt from *In This Very Life* conveys one important aspect of '*anuggahīta*'. Thanissaro Bhikkhu's gloss "supports," in his translation of this discourse, gives another. To include both of these aspects of the word as well as a few other important connotations, such as the way a parent cares for a child or a gardener for a plant, I have used a gloss of 'tended' in my translation above. For the verb form, *anu(g)gaṇhāti,* the *PTS*, 35, gives "to have pity on, to feel sorry for, to help, give protection," and cites the Cūḷaniddesa {Myanmar page 240, no PTS edition}, where the past participle *anugaṇhamāno* is given along with *anukampamāno* ('being compassionate') and *anupekkhamāno* ('being considerate') as qualities of a selfless friend. The original Burmese talks that were translated and edited to produce *In This Very Life* have been transcribed and published in Burmese by Thamanay Kyaw as [*America Dhamma-desanā*] (Yangon: Organization for the Propagation of Theravāda Buddhism, no date). In the original, U Paṇḍita uses a string of Bumese words to give a translation of '*anuggahīta*' that covers the whole gamut: "ကာကွယ် စောင်ရှောက် ထောက်ပံ့ရတာ" could be glossed as 'protection, tending, support'.

IV

Conduct

protecting the world

The "Discourse on the Protections (or Supports)" of right view mentions first *sīla*, used in the Pāḷi as an abbreviation of *kusala sīla*, 'skillful conduct'. "Its importance cannot be overstressed," says Sayadaw U Paṇḍita; "without sīla, no further practices can be undertaken."[1] To elucidate this factor, he extends his cultivation analogy for the practice:

> As gardeners do, we must build a fence around our little plot to protect against large animals, deer and rabbits, who might devour our tender plant as soon as it tries to sprout. This first protection is *sīlā·nuggahita*, morality's protection against gross and wild behavior which agitates the mind and prevents concentration and wisdom from ever appearing.[2]

This understanding of skillful conduct as the absolute minimum and the foundation of the practice appears throughout the Theravāda in Asia. When Michael Carrithers suggested to certain Sri Laṅkan forest monks that "after first meditating, one would realize the significance of living a moral life by the Buddhist precepts," echoing the views of some innovative modern spiritual teachers, "the impatience and even outrage with which the monks heard it and the unity of view with which it was rejected, left no doubt that the monks place moral purity in

1 Paṇḍita 1993: 11.
2 Paṇḍita 1993: 22-3.

the central position I had wished to accord to meditative experience."[3] The Mahāsi Sayadaw and his senior teaching disciples have put no small emphasis on concentrated mindfulness practice, but have invariably held *sīla* to be prerequisite.

If the training rules are derived from a "basic sense of humanity," for U Paṇḍita, it is observance of the standard Theravādin disciplinary formulations that constitutes skillful conduct.[4] Thus, he often says that only someone who refrains at a minimum from killing, from stealing, from indulging in sexual pleasures they do not have the right to, from lying, as well as from any and all intoxicants can be called truly 'humane'. American practitioners have generally interpreted *sīla* somewhat differently. One senior teacher who left IMS to found a more eclectic center on the West Coast, Jack Kornfield, observes that the precepts

> are much more fundamental to practice in Asia... With this foundation of wise conduct and inner training, you have a context for the deepest wisdom and it's naturally integrated in your life. What has happened in the West seems to be a reversal of that.[5]

Indeed, many Westerners became established in intensive spiritual practices, including Theravādin *sīla*, in the search for ways to maintain or surpass psychedelic and other 'highs'. This the 'reversal' of the traditional progression to which Kornfield refers.

Of the three aspects of training, skillful conduct is manifested more externally than concentration or wisdom; perhaps it is more variable in different cultural contexts for this reason. In any case, Asians' and Americans' interpretations of *sīla* seem to have diverged more than other aspects of practice, sometimes quite significantly. Perhaps the most evident difference between

---

3 Michael Carrinthers cited in Bond 1996: 39-40.

4 E.g. Paṇḍita 1993: 11.

5 Kornfield 1995: 35.

Theravādin practice in Burma and in the United States is the phenomenon some have called "laicization."[6] While the teaching of the Mahāsi tradition in Burma is almost exclusively the domain of celibate monks, no native-born Americans are ordained and teaching in this tradition today as far as I know.[7] Differing cultural ideals of spirituality are significant factors in this development, no doubt. Hebrew priests and Greek philosophers denied themselves neither wine nor women, so these historical influences have effected the role of practitioners in Barre and in Burma quite differently than has the ancient Indian ideal of renunication.

Renunciates And Renunciation

Around 500 B.C.E. in northern India there developed a large but very diverse movement of spiritual seekers who renounced the household life and lived as wandering ascetics. According to the Pāḷi texts, the first students of the Buddha were fellow renunciates who had previously lived as with him as forest ascetics. At the establishment of the Buddha's mendicant community, the *bhikkhu saṅgha*, there was no elaborate procedure for ordination nor were there any explicit rules. These were only formulated as the *bhikkhu saṅgha* grew and some members violated the norms commonly expected of renunciates and

6 E.g. King 1976.

7 There are a few American-born monks teaching in other Theravādin traditions, such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu of the Thai Dhammayut sect. Bhikkhu Bodhi ordained and initially trained under the Sri Laṅkan scholar-monk Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, and later trained with Bhikkhu Ñaṇapoṇika. Both teachers belonged to the Sri Laṅkan Amarapura Nikaya, which originated in upper Burma, and Bhikkhu Ñaṇapoṇika was particularly heavily influenced by the Mahasi Sayadaw. There are a few Americans currently living as monks after having trained under senior students of the Mahāsi Sayadaw who may move into the role of teachers in the future.

mendicants at that time, as the Vinaya Piṭaka makes clear.[8] In his last days the Buddha reportedly said, "If it is desired, Ānanda, the Saṅgha may, when I am gone, abolish the lesser and minor rules," but precisely which were meant was never clearly stated. Thus the Theravādin tradition, at least, has followed a policy of maintaining all the rules as laid down during the Buddha's lifetime rather than abolish rules he had intended to be followed.[9]

Modern Burmese Theravādins have inherited extensive and detailed formulations of discipline for monks. They study not only the 227 rules of the *Paṭimokkha* and the thousands of minor regulations found in other parts of the Vinaya Piṭaka, but also the explanations and elaborations in commentarial works, ancient and modern. The Mahāsi Sayadaw and his senior students, among others, have practiced and preached strict adherence to even minor Vinaya rules. According to the Burmese monks I have spoken with, however, perhaps the majority of their comrades rigorously abstain only from the nineteen most serious

8 The stories behind each rule details how the laity's reaction provided the principle impetus for formulating much of the Vinaya, "People were offended and annoyed and spread it about, 'How can these Sakyan contemplatives...'" e.g. Pacattiya 11{Vin.IV,34}, translated in Thanissaro 1994: Ch. 8, part II. In the Bhaddāli Sutta (M.65){I,445}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the Buddha notes that when the order of nuns and monks has become large, wealthy, powerful, learned, or long-standing, only then are there conditions for problems to arise. "When beings have begun to degenerate, and the true Dhamma has begun to disappear, there are more training rules and fewer bhikkhus established in the knowledge of Awakening. The Teacher does not lay down a training rule for his disciples as long as there are no cases where the conditions that offer a foothold for the effluents have arisen in the Community. But when there *are* cases where the conditions that offer a foothold for the effluents have arisen in the Community, then the Teacher lays down a training rule for his disciples so as to counteract those very conditions."

9 Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (D.16){II,154}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. According to tradition, this was decided at the First Council, just after the Buddha's death, where the *saṅgha* censured Ānanda for not having asked specifically which rules the Buddha meant were 'lesser and minor'; I suspect that quite a few monks over the past 2500 years, living within the confines of quite detailed rules formulated for a specific context, have wished that Ānanda had been more inquisitive.

infractions.[10] Despite the fact that there are Vinaya rules against handling money, for instance, most Burmese today do not expect this of renunciates; in fact they give cash to monks, thereby illustrating the fact that for better or worse the practice of discipline is defined by the human context, today as in the past.

The society of the Buddha's day directed spiritual seekers to a particular form of renunciate life and supported them as long as they abided by the conventions of celibacy and living on alms, as well as a general etiquette of restraint. Over the past 2500 years, those who have renounced the responsibilities of supporting families have obviously been most able to dedicate their energy to the practice and transmission of *Dhamma-Vinaya.* Thus the *bhikkhu saṅgha* has been almost exclusively responsible for the compilation, preservation, and interpretation of the Buddha's teachings, so it is not surprising that the vast majority of Theravādin formulations of skillful conduct are designed for ordained practitioners who refrain from sexual and economic activity. Steven Smith cites this as "grounds for unsurpassed gratitude by those (Westerners) who have received and benefited from this legacy."[11]

Nevertheless, the *Sutta Piṭaka* gives numerous instances of lay followers of the Buddha, many with various levels of attainment in the practice.[12] Apparently, a few even became *dhamma* teachers

---

10 These are the four Pārājikā: sexual intercourse, stealing, killing a human being, and falsely boasting of spiritual accomplishments, as well as the thirteen Sanghādisesa and the two Aniyata, which include a number of rules proscribing such things as masturbation and certain intimate interactions by a monk with females, as well as rules against falsely accusing another monk of a transgression, and so on. Burmese monks absolve themselves of transgressions of all the remaining minor rules by using a confession procedure which can be either an inspired renewal of the commitment to the life of renunciation, or formulaic and not very meaningful.

11 Steven Smith, in his notes on a draft of *Strong Roots*, April 2003.

12 At M.73{I,490}, for instance, the Buddha explicitly states that many ("not just one... two... three... four... not just five hundred") of his lay followers, many female and many male, have adandoned the lower ties of sensuality

with students of their own.[13] Though later Theravādin tradition confined the laity almost exclusively to the role of supporting ordained practitioners, it appears that at the time of the Buddha lay people practiced all aspects of the Eightfold Noble Path.

In this sense, the modern Vipassanā movement has been a kind of 'revival'. Twentieth century teachers in Burma such as the Ledi Sayadaw, the Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw, and the Mahāsi Sayadaw advocated concentrated mindfulness practice, pointing out that the last three factors of the Eightfold Noble Path laid out in the Pāḷi texts are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. *Satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishment of mindfulness, was novel at that time not only for lay people, but also for the majority of the *bhikkhu saṅgha* which, probably since the early part of the first millennium C.E., had been occupied with intellectual study and occasionally with absorption practices. Since modern Theravādin monasteries primarily perform educational and social functions, specialized retreat centers have been created to provide people with the requisite quiet, shelter, food, and guidance to enable concentrated mindfulness and thus insight to develop. This has meant that lay people can temporarily renounce the pleasures and responsibilities of family and livelihood in order to devote themselves to intensive practice, much as monks and nuns of the Buddha's day retreated to the forest. The popularity of lay practice has had a profound impact on the community of practitioners, of course, but has

---

and so on, thus becoming non-returners, not to mention those who have achieved the lower stages of enlightenment.

13 E.g. The housholder Citto, whom the Buddha calls the premier dhamma speaker (i.e. teacher) among his lay disciples, at A.I.14:6{I,26}. Cited by Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions*, 135. The Buddha praises the way the householder Anathapiṇḍika instructs some non-Buddhist renunciates at A.X.93{V,185}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikku, saying "Monks, even a monk who has long penetrated the Dhamma in this Doctrine and Discipline would do well to refute the wanderers of other persuasions with the Dhamma periodically in just the way Anathapindika the householder has done."

been perhaps less structurally transformative in Asia than Sharf would suggest.

> By rendering the essence of Buddhism as an "experience," the laity successfully wrested authority over the doctrine away from the clergy. The guarantee of orthodoxy was no longer rigorous adherence to the monastic code (*vinaya*), but rather a firsthand experience of the fruit of meditation – *nirvāṇa*. Meditation instructors with little or no formal training in canonical exegesis were free to pontificate on the meaning of Buddhist scriptures, or, alternatively, to reject the need for scriptural learning altogether.[14]

In fact, such a description is more true of the Mahāsi tradition in America than in Burma, where almost all of the teachers are monks. Students rely on such ordained meditation masters for their ability to explicate meditation practice in the framework of scriptural theory, and to bring appropriate teachings from the discourses of the Buddha in the Pāḷi to bear on the particular difficulties and successes of practicing meditators.

Outside Asia, the situation has been quite different. Almost all of the first Vipassanā teachers in America were under thirty when they found the practice in the 60s and 70s; some of these are now the senior teachers at Insight meditation centers around the country. Though a few did receive ordination and practice in Asia for years at a time, to date none of the American teachers in the Mahāsi tradition has remained 'in robes'. The Chinese occupation of Tibet and the American occupation of Japan provided impetus (though in very different ways) for ordained elders trained extensively in the respective Tibetan and Zen traditions to live and teach abroad. In contrast, while a few Burmese, Thai, and Sri Laṅkan meditation masters did visit the United States in the later half of the twentieth century, very few of them have remained here. In America, the first well-known interpreters of the Mahāsi tradition were lay people, a number of whom began teaching in their twenties and thirties. When these

14 Sharf 1995: 258. The issue of whether *nirvāṇa* can be accurately described as an 'experience' or as the 'fruit of meditation', is discussed on p.259.

teachings first arrived in the United States, the people leading retreats had nowhere near the maturity in terms of age or doctrinal study that is typically required of teachers in Asia.

Very few American teachers or practitioners in the Mahāsi tradition have committed permanently to the celibate, mendicant lifestyle. Goldstein speculates that "Americans are not very good at renunciation."[15] Whatever the reason, this lack of a community of American nuns and monks, an indigenous *bhikkhu saṅgha*, is perhaps the greatest difference between IMS and Mahāsi centers in Burma. Meditation centers provide practitioners with the conditions of the renunciate lifestyle on a temporary basis, but this hardly offers the same level of support for personal practice, as Goldstein recognizes.[16]

> As householders we're busy and we have a lot of responsibilities, and the work of dharma takes time. The view that it's as perfect a vehicle as monasticism doesn't accord with what the Buddha taught. He was very clear in the original teachings that the household life is "full of dust." But since we don't have a monastic culture in America, the great challenge is how to achieve liberation as laypeople...[17]

I would add another 'great challenge': establishing institutions to support a monastic culture here. Enabling people who are drawn to this life of joyous simplicity to invest all their energy in working for their own and others' liberation is not only a great gift to the renunciates themselves, it is absolutely necessary for the teachings to maintain their purity and power over the long term. Commenting on an earlier draft of *Strong Roots*, Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote,

15 Personal communication, April 2002.

16 Most Mahāsi tradition meditation centers in the West, unlike their Burmese counterparts, have generally found it necessary to charge for room and board, though there are now scholarships established at centers like IMS. The teachings in the Mahāsi tradition continue to be given freely on the basis of reciprocal generosity, *dāna*.

17 Goldstein 1993a: 15.

> I continue to question... whether a Theravada Buddhist lineage, even a strictly meditative lineage, will preserve its definitive identity without the "protective envelope" of a monastic order. Davis perhaps doesn't take sufficient cognizance of the consequences that might follow when a practice rooted in a discipline of radical renunciation becomes disseminated among people who don't share the same world view or orientation. The adoption of a highly simplified lifestyle during the course of a meditation retreat is quite different from the type of renunciation that inspires practitioners within the monastic lineages. Of course, very few who take ordination as monks or nuns in traditional Buddhist communities have a strong impulse towards renunciation, and we shouldn't cherish any illusions about this. But this ideal still remains deeply implanted in them as an ultimate value, even when they cannot adequately fulfill it. It seems to me – and perhaps I am mistaken about this – that what is taking place in the West, particularly in the U.S., is the transplantation of Buddhist meditation practice from its original supporting matrix of Buddhist faith and doctrine to a secular and skeptical environment in which Buddhist meditation is utilized for its mundane, this-worldly benefits rather than for its liberative potential.[18]

The Venerable Bodhi's point is well taken. My experience with nuns and monks such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita has convinced me that such renunciation of worldly goals and total commitment to the life of *Dhamma-Vinaya* greatly facilitates a teacher's ability to offer the purest kind of guidance for practitioners and for the tradition as a whole. In the Pāḷi, the Buddha recognizes that one cannot categorically state the life of the renunciate to be more fruitful than that of a householder because one can fail or succeed at 'going forth' just as in business. He does find, however, that the need to maintain a livelihood can often lead people to compromise principles such as speaking the truth forthrightly, and that skillful qualities are found more frequently among those who have taken up the discipline of a renunciate. Such high level *sīla*, the Buddha says, allows the renunciate to live honestly and generously, "developing a mind that is without hostility and

18 Bhikkhu Bodhi, commenting on a draft of *Strong Roots*, February, 2003.

without ill-will."[19] The importance of a *bhikkhu saṅgha* is illustrated by an instance from the history of the Buddha's teachings in Sri Laṅka. According to the account given in the Vinaya texts, when the elder Mahinda first established the *Buddha-Sāsana* on the island, the King Devānaṁpiyatissa asked of the monk at what point the roots of the teachings would go deep on the island of Laṅka. The Venerable Mahinda told him that when a youth born on the island, of parents native to the island, enters the *bhikhhu saṅgha* on the island, learns the *Vinaya* on the island, and teaches it on the island, "then indeed, will the roots of the Dispensation have descended."[20]

In order for a strong American monastic community in the Mahāsi tradition to develop, I see three basic requisites. First of all, we need women and men interested in committing to the renunciate life; of these there are already a number and many more would be touched by the example of these pioneers. Secondly, we need monasteries for them to live in; maintaining high-level *sīla* is nigh on impossible without the shelter and support of a community. Finally, we need lay people who are moved to support the nuns and monks by providing food and other requisites, and by assisting with needs such as transportation and handling finances.

If a a strong lay community is necessary to support the ordained *saṅgha*, likewise, a community of nuns and monks is necessary to guide and support the practice of lay people. Here again, balance is the key.

> This is the way the Buddha set it up – the fourfold assembly, that is, lay and monastic, females and males. And it is clear to me that this relationship is pivotal. Lay Buddhism without the monastics feels rudderless to me and I can't imagine that it could endure; and monastic Buddhism without the laity feels cold and isolated and surely would not survive...[21]

19 Subha Sutta (M.99){II,206}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

20 Pārājikakaṇḍa-A{I,102}, trans. N. A. Jayawickrama, (Vin.XXI.105) 90.

21 Taraniya 2003: 7.

Gloria Taraṇiyā Ambrosia is an Insight Meditation teacher with strong ties to the Western monastic community of Achaan Cha's Thai lineage. In spending time with Theravāda nuns and monks, she and I both have been deeply impressed by "the power of the form and the effect of its skillful use." Thus Taraṇiyā feels optimistic about interest in monasticism in the West. Her remarks come from an interview in which she described her recent realization about the importance of valuing lay practice as well as monastic practice.

> For many years I thought lay life was what was left over after I couldn't make the decision to be a nun... once I stopped measuring my life against theirs, I could see that I was actually incredibly happy being a lay supporter... Since [then] I have investigated the Buddha's teachings on lay life much more closely and am endeavoring to learn about and live the Buddhist life as a layperson more fully. This makes me very happy.[22]

In modern Burma, where there has been a strong *bhikkhu saṅgha*, the Mahāsi Sayadaw and others encouraged a movement towards the balanced community described in the Pāḷi texts by enabling lay people to get involved in intensive mindfulness practice. In modern America, where the lay community of practitioners is rapidly growing, a movement towards balance must include the development of a strong community of renunciates.

So far, the protection of the Vinaya discipline has not attracted great numbers of Americans. One major obstacle to the ordained life – for half of the population, at the very least – is a perceived inequality between nuns and monks in the Theravāda. In Burma, monks do maintain a status and authority that far exceeds that of female renunciates. In part, this is due to the fact that in the Theravādin lineage of fully ordained nuns died out, so that while Burmese monks are fully ordained and are bound by the full 227 Vinaya rules, their female counterparts are not. Nonetheless, many female *thila-shins* in Burma seem to be very

22 Taraniya 2003: 7.

scrupulous and committed to the eight or ten precepts they do vow to observe, perhaps more comitted than many monks are to the full set of their own disciplinary rules.[23]

Misogynistic aspects of ancient India and modern Burma have indeed exacerbated the divide between male and female renunciates. Some of the conclusions the Theravādin tradition has reached regarding relations of authority and respect between monks and nuns may not be appropriate in this American context; they may not accomplish the purpose for which they were apparently created: maximizing the ability of the Dhamma community to attract and support practitioners, by maintaining its respectability in the society of its day. If *Dhamma-Vinaya* is determined by context, and if misogyny has been an aspect of Indian and Burmese society, we should not expect the Theravādin teachings to be free of it. By the same token, however, a new context redefines *Dhamma-Vinaya.* The majority of the Mahāsi practitioners in the United States today are women, and female teachers and scholars are playing a significant and vital role in establishing this American tradition.[24] Indeed, one of the most fruitful aspects of this new American *Sāsana* is its realization of this potential for female leadership, which has been latent but largely unrealized in the Burmese Theravāda.

A number of Americans and other Westerners have expressed interest in the reestablishment of a *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, an order of fully ordained nuns, on a par with the monks. The Mahasi Sayadaw's teacher, the Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw, made a strong

---

23 So I have observed, at least, in my times as a monk in Burma.

24 "Most sitting groups and retreats have more women participants than men. Spirit Rock's mailing list of 24,000 contains twice as many women as men. At a weekly sitting group in Palo Alto, California, typically about 65 percent of the approximately one hundred participants are women. A four-day residential retreat in Kansas City in the spring of 1995 and a seventeen-day residential retreat for experienced practitioners held in San Rafael, California, in the fall of 1995 both had ratios of 65 percent women to 35 percent men," according to Fronsdal 1998: 178.

case for the ordaining of *bhikkhunis*, for which he paid a steep political price.

> Women, who were permitted Blessed One, knowing and seeing... and rightly-self-awakened, should be given ordination in the same way now by the order of monks... The lineage of the nuns's order being cut off at present, we will bring the Bhikkhuni Sāsana together again. We will know the Blessed One's desire... Such is the direction given to future bhikkhus regarding this question.[25]

Statements such as this one caused the Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw's *Milindapañha-aṭṭhakathā* to be banned in Burma in the 1950s. Perhaps modern North America will offer more fertile ground for this elder's vision; perhaps not. Many feel a "duty as Buddhist women of the present age... to make the sasana bright, shining, and complete."[26] The organization Sakyadhita, 'Daughters of the Buddha', has recently reestablished a Theravādin *bhikkhunī* lineage; there are now some 200 fully ordained nuns and a training center in Sri Laṅka.[27] Nonetheless, the Theravādin Vinaya was formulated in very different times. I wonder whether the extremely high level of discipline required by the Theravādin *bhikkhuni* rules will prove livable for modern women, especially Westerners, over the long term. There are, for instance, many rules that apply only to nuns, such as not travelling or spending the night without another nun present, designed to protect the *bhikkhunis* from being in situations where they might be taken advantage of sexually. If the goal is full equality – having exactly equivalent rules and seniority, I am not sure that that is possible within the bounds of Theravādin Vinaya. And so I wonder whether establishing a *bhikkhuni* sāsana

---

25 My translation of Narada 1999: 197-203.

26 Lottermoser 1991, echoing the Mingun Jetwun Sayadaw's views, writes that "The sasana is incomplete if higher ordination into religious orders is not available to women, since this opportunity was originally granted by Lord Buddha. Buddha himself said to Mara that his teaching is well-establish only if all the four groups of disciples are complete: bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, upasakas [lay men], and upasikas [lay women].

27 Jutima 2002.

will even solve the pressing problem of misogyny in the Theravāda, which I do see as a real detriment to the spread of the Buddha's Dhamma-Vinaya and the happiness of beings.

The question of a community of fully ordained nuns may be somewhat irrelevant to female practitioners' status in North America if the celibate, renunciate lifestyle does not gain more popularity in this new context. Achaan Cha, who founded one of the most successful traditions of Theravādin monasticism in the West, reportedly commented that he would be willing to establish a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* if only there were some women willing to constitute it.[28] While there is strong and vocal support for female equality among American practitioners, very few of us – male or female – have committed to the renunciate lifestyle. Thanissaro Bhikkhu makes an interesting point, "I think what's hardest here in the West is simply the *idea* of rules."[29] Certainly, some members of the IMS community reacted strongly against the discipline followed by visiting Asian monks. An IMS staff member who had practiced before at the San Francisco Zen Center remarked in an interview almost a decade ago,

> One thing that happened when I came here was that I stepped into the stone age! I couldn't *believe* what goes on in this tradition. The men monks are not allowed to ride alone in a car with a woman, so when we go to arrange doctors rides for them we have to find a guy. I said, 'I'm just not doing it. I don't believe in it, to me its sexist, and I don't think that's what the Buddha meant, and if it *is* what he meant, it's wrong!' It comes from: Women seduce men.[30]

This interview was published in Sandy Boucher's book on women in *Buddhism, where the au*thor comments that perhaps

28 The Venerable Vajirañāṇi (Ellen Mooney), an American nun who practices and studies under Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, related this event to me; I have not come across it in any other source.

29 Thanissaro 1998: 65.

30 Barbara Horn, as quoted by Boucher 1988: 347.

such "instinctive aversion echoes the resistance of those early Massachusetts women to male-instigated religious tyranny."[31]

Having lived as a monk in Burma for over a year, and having studied Vinaya carefully with cross-cultural implications in mind, my own understanding of these particular rules differs from Boucher's. First, it must be understood that the Theravādin tradition, as Indian thought in general, has advocated temporary seclusion in order to nurture in someone not yet fully awakened the ability to deal with certain challenging or disturbing experiences. The significant differences between this approach and that of the Judeo-Christian tradition are discussed below in the chapter on "Tranquility."[32] The accounts of the Vinaya Piṭaka detail how situations arose in which unscrupulous monks harmed women and the ordained community's reputation, prompting the formulation of certain disciplinary guidelines. The original intent of these rules is especially clear when one examines the stories behind corresponding discipline prohibiting fully ordained women from being alone with men, a number of which were formulated in response to sexual assaults by bandits and others who were not in training under the Buddha. In both cases, the rules arise out of a recognition of the unpleasant realities of human society. Rather than insisting on ideals that could only be practicable only by perfected people in a perfect community, the Vinaya lays out practical approaches to minimize the occurrence of dangerous situations that might result in harm to any party's physical, mental, or social well-being.

To maintain and inspire faith in the teachings, ambassadors of the *Sāsana* must not only avoid getting involved in harmful situations, they must avoid even the appearance of compromising their discipline. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the American Theravādin monk who recently authored *The Buddhist Monastic Code: The Patimokkha Training Rules Translated and Explained*, makes an

31 Boucher 1988: 347.

32 Please see the discussion on p.227.

important point: the textual accounts of the rules such as those against monks being alone with women, in almost every case, describe inappropriate behavior on the part of certain monks, not the women, as the reason for the rule.

> The rules are basically a reminder that the relationship between a teacher and a student of the opposite sex has a lot of potential for being abused. And when it does get abused it's devastating. It's not that monks are bad, or women are bad, but this particular situation has to be handled very carefully... So the monk's guidelines are just that: guidelines that say in a certain situation, you have to be very circumspect about how you act.[33]

These rules can indeed be quite a protection for female students. Michele McDonald's experience with a Theravādin monk illustrates the importance of a teacher's skillful conduct (*sīla*) in fostering trust.

> U Paṇḍita encouraged me to intensify mindfulness beyond what I thought possible... Even though he was tough with me I really trusted him because he had such an aura of sila, which was extremely important to me with a history of abuse. I also really trusted him because of his technical brilliance. I can be a warrior as a yogi, I really want to be free. So I just did what he said.[34]

In fact, Carla Brennan's accounts of "sexual abuse of power" by male Buddhist teachers, which Boucher cites in detail, illustrate the importance of rules covering relationships between a teacher and a student of the opposite gender. Notably, the instances discussed involved men who were not bound by the strict Theravādin Vinaya rules against touching or being alone with women. Brennan was particularly "disturbed" by one incident at IMS

> because, while there was general disapproval of what had happened, there was not an understanding that this incident related to larger issues in the spiritual or Buddhist community concerning power, authority, and the relationships between women and men.

---

33 Thanissaro 1998: 65.

34 McDonald 2000.

The Theravādin Vinaya is designed to address precisely these kinds of issues of community and individual ethics. The texts give many practical measures that might be of great use in spiritual communities today such as specific directions for ordained practitioners to ask forgiveness formally from anyone they might have harmed and to request others to tell them of their faults so they might improve. Since dedicated spiritual practitioners in the Buddha's day were directed towards renunciate communities, the Vinaya provided guidelines for these groups' governance and maintenance, as well as insuring that the ordained disciples of the Buddha would be respected and supported by the society around them. This much is apparent in a stock phrase repeated throughout the Vinaya Piṭaka:

> In that case, bhikkhus, I will formulate a training rule for the bhikkhus with ten aims in mind: the excellence of the Community, the peace of the Community, the curbing of the shameless, the comfort of well-behaved bhikkhus, the restraint of effluents related to the present life, the prevention of effluents related to the next life, the arousing of faith in the faithless, the increase of the faithful, the establishment of the true Dhamma, and the fostering of discipline.[35]

Definition And Confusion

The IMS community has recently attempted something of a return to the value of disciplinary guidelines, developing a 'Code of Ethics' for Vipassanā teachers.[36] Gil Fronsdale writes that until the mid-1980s many Western teachers of insight meditation were far less willing to emphasize ethical guidelines than their Asian masters.

35 E.g. Vin. Pārājika I{III,21}, translated by Thanissaro 1994: intro.

36 Fronsdal 1998: 175, cites the *vipassanā* teacher's code of ethics in the appendix of Kornfield 1993: 340-43.

> Since then, and particularly in the United States, an increasing stress has been placed on ethics and on the traditional Buddhist precepts for the laity. The change was to a great extent a response both to a wider cultural interest in ethics and to a significant number of ethical transgressions by Asian and Western teachers of Tibetan, Zen, and Theravāda Buddhism.[37]

Since almost none of the American Vipassanā teachers are ordained nuns or monks, they are unlikely make full use of the Vinaya guidelines. The American practice community, made up almost entirely of householders, has already produced new interpretations of skillful conduct. The Buddha's descriptions of *sīla* for lay people in the Pāḷi texts differ somewhat between various contexts. George Bond describes two common formulations of skillful conduct evident in the early texts: one a type of self-restraint oriented towards psychological purity and full awakening, the other more externally focused on discipline and based on one's role in life.[38] The Theravādin tradition, dominated by monks, has emphasized particularly the external aspect: sets of precepts adapted from those for fully ordained renunciates. For general household life, the precepts were abbreviated to five, said to bring many boons in current and future lives: abstention from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants that cause heedlessness. In addition to following these precepts, people on intensive retreat at Mahāsi meditation centers in Burma simulate certain aspects of ordained life by refraining from all sexual activity, from eating after noon,

---

37 Fronsdal 1998: 175.

38 Bond 1996: 24ff, suggests that the *ābhisamācarikā sikkhā* "denotes the general standard of conduct expected of a bhikkhu living in a monastery," e.g. M.69{I,469}. Noting how at A.IV.245{II,243} the Buddha contrasts the more internally oriented formulation of discipline, laid down for the purpose of ending all suffering, (see below) with this *ābhisamācarika sikkhā,* laid down for the purpose of cultivating the clarity of faith, Bond asserts that it is this "mundane" *ābhisamācarika* form of skillful conduct that developed into the now standard Theravādin training precepts.

from amusements such as dancing and singing, and from bodily adornment.[39]

Silent retreats, moreover, enable people to practice the other formulation of *sīla* described in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, which focuses on the type of 'internal' restraint leading to "the complete destruction of all suffering."[40] The precepts against killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct are the first of this *kammapatha* formulation, duplicating the more standard list of discipline, with the exception of intoxicants. The next four abstentions are from false, harsh, divisive, and frivolous speech, which, as teachers often point out, should not be a problem for meditators on silent retreat. Some texts list a final three abstentions: from covetousness, malevolence, and wrong view. 'Retreat' from the pleasures and pains of social life is intended to diminish these first two, and a teacher's instructions the third, but the development of insight is employed to finally uproot the latent tendencies of craving, aversion, and ignorance. These more psychological oriented aspects of right speech and right action have been presented very similarly by Burmese and American teachers in the Mahāsi tradition.

---

39 This last, though, seems to be interpreted for lay people to mean dressing simply and practically; no one seems to mind if meditators continue to wear watches and jewelry on retreat, as long as they are not ostentatious.

40 In contrast to the externally oriented formulations, the *ādibrahamacariyā sikkhā* is declared at A.IV.245{II,243} to lead to the "complete destruction of all *dukkha*"; Bond, "Two Formulations," 33ff, identifies this as the *kammapathas*: refraining from the bodily actions of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, as well as the verbal actions of false speech (*musāvādā*), slanderous speech (*pisuṇa vācāya*), harsh speech (*pharusā vācāya*), and frivolous speech (*samphappalāpā*), often supplemented by the addition of three purely psychological abstentions: from covetousness (*abhijjhāya*), malevolence (*byāpādā*), and wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhi*), as at S.XIV.25{II,168} and A.III.115{I,268}. At M.117{III,71ff}, this list of ten is shown to "represent the practical outworking" of the Eightfold Noble Path: right speech includes the four verbal precepts, right action the three bodily precepts, the remaining factors of meditative practice being intended to uproot the unskillful psychological roots.

The more externally oriented presentations of *sīla*, such as the five precepts, have been interpreted quite differently in Asia and in the United States. Perhaps the most fundamental reason for this is that as lay practitioners, most American teachers do not have the supports and constraints of a monastic lifestyle. In Burma, because lay people provide the necessary support, monks can remain aloof from certain aspects of life, and so it is possible to hold them to a high level of skillful conduct. At IMS, however, when issues such as a cockroach infestation arise, the teachers are not innocent of the decision to use poison.[41] Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that in America the precepts are generally defined in terms of intention, rather than in terms of action. Moreover, *sīla* is almost always defined explicitly in terms of abstention in Asia, for instance the precept 'not to take life' or 'not to take what is not given'. American teachers more often describe the positive aspect of skillful conduct, what is to be cultivated. Steven Armstrong, for instance, gives a very flexible, though inclusive, rendition of the five precepts: "a commitment to not harming," "a commitment to sharing," "making and keeping clear relationships," "speaking carefully: the power of intention," and "keeping the mind clear."[42] Such presentations echo the more internally oriented formulations of *sīla* found in certain Pāḷi discourses, whereas the more standard presentation in Burma developed from Vinaya rules originally for *bhikkhus*, as noted above.[43]

In certain cases, there can be confusion about how the standard Burmese formulation of the precepts should be applied to an American layperson's life. Causing an abortion, for instance, is considered for Theravādin monks and nuns to amount to

41 Hamilton 1995: 111, notes this as an instance of 'streamwinners' breaking precepts.

42 Armstrong 1999: 216-30.

43 Please see note 40 on p.139. Bond 1996 notes that some reformist Sri Laṅkan Buddhists have revived the *kammapathas* as their definition of *sīla*, rejecting the traditional list for lay people.

killing a human being. This formulation is consistent with the Theravādin understanding of consciousness and rebirth, but what does it mean for American laywomen trying to maintain the precepts? To date, public discussions within the IMS community seem to have mostly avoided this contentious topic. The Fall 1993 issue of *Inquiring Mind*, a "journal of the Vipassana community," did include an article by a Zen priest who seems to have found a position respectful both to her tradition and to American women's difficult choices.

> For me, the Buddha's first precept – not to kill intentionally – cannot be denied, much less minimized... I feel compelled to take a stand against abortion... At the same time, I can readily and willingly keep someone company when abortion is the choice she has arrived at. I am strongly in favor of the freedom of each individual to choose for herself what to do regarding a conflicted pregnancy. I could not and would not advocate a return to the years when the government controlled a woman's decision.[44]

Monks and nuns make use of people's support with the understanding that, as renunciates, they are devoting their energy to practice, so certain aspects of sensuality are clearly inappropriate for them. The daily life of a householder is very different from the ordained life, so the practice of discipline differs between these contexts in certain ways. In a few discourses, the Buddha presents guidelines such as, "A lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in living beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison."[45] These are quite clear, readily applicable, and reasonable to American practitioners familiar with ethical principles of not causing or enabling harm.

Lay *dhamma* teachers, however, are somewhat novel to the Theravādin tradition.[46] Renunciates were supported by the laity

44 Rand 1995: 88.

45 Vanijja Sutta (A.V.177){III,208}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

46 According to the Pāḷi, there were lay teachers at the time of the Buddha (see note 13 on p.126), but by the time the Theravāda emerged as a tradition in

in ancient India as they are in Burma today, and since almost all *dhamma* teachers were ordained, a relationship of mutual generosity, *dāna*, naturally developed. This meant that the 'priceless teachings' could be offered free of charge to students, who in return supported the teacher as they saw fit. This type of relationship is evidenced in the Pāḷi texts by the Buddha's relationship to his lay disciples. In one discourse, he reveals the principle behind this relationship, "The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak not for the purpose of material reward'."[47]

Guidelines for the financial support of lay teachers, however, have not been explicitly preserved in the early Pāḷi texts nor in the later commentaries, so they have been recently innovated. Lay meditation teachers under the direction of S. N. Goenka do not accept donations from students at all, and must have other means of livelihood. In contrast, the Mahāsi tradition has extended the relationship of mutual generosity to lay teachers as well, allowing teachers to accept voluntary donations from students. This has enabled senior practitioners to devote themselves to teaching full time, helping many more students than they would be able to otherwise. Nonetheless, lay teachers with family responsibilities theoretically would require much more support from their communities of students than would celibate mendicants, at least in general. This is another reason why the development of a *bhikkhu saṅgha* of monks and nuns is important for the American Vipassanā community. As Sayadaw U Paṇḍita remarks, referring to the suffering ablaze in the world, "Lay teachers are like the volunteer fire brigade, but *bhikkhus* are the professional fire fighters."[48]

In Burma, not only the teachings, but also room and board at meditation centers are offered entirely free of charge. A large and

the fifth century C.E., the teaching of Dhamma seems to have been largely restricted to monks.

47 Udāyi Sutta (A.V.159){III,184}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

48 Grahame White relayed this remark of U Paṇḍita's to me.

steady flow of donations from an overwhelmingly supportive populace makes this possible. In the United States, centers like IMS have found it necessary to charge fees in order to provide food and maintain the institution, though they have strived to minimize these costs. In the early years, staff positions at IMS paid very small stipends, in effect making such service possible only for those with savings to tide them over. One former head of maintenance, Jo Palumbo, noted that IMS is a "white, middle-class scene, so it's hard for people to understand any kind of poverty... The part that people don't look at, with the monastic traditions, is that someone is footing the bill."[49] Americans are not generally familiar with the institution of *dāna*; thus on being told that the tapes of teachers' talks were offered free of charge, one caller requested the entire library of over a thousand tapes. The person in charge, of course, had to explain the necessity of mutual generosity for the survival of the tape library. Since the concept of *dāna* as articulated in Asia is not present in America, one IMS community member has suggested that fundraising and endowment could allow retreat centers in the United States to provide services free of charge in an analogous way.[50] However, we must consider John Bullitt's point that *dāna* and fundraising are not the same thing at all.

> Alas, in recent years the notion of *dana* seems to have been co-opted by many Buddhist organizations in the West as just another fundraising gimmick, designed to appeal to our better nature... To my mind, these valiant efforts at drumming up material support for Buddhist causes only dampen the true spirit of *dana,* that weightless, heartfelt, and spontaneous upwelling of generous action that lies at the very root of the Buddha's teachings.[51]

In any case, the shift from ordained to lay practitioners and from monasteries to retreat centers has engendered many new

49 Quoted in Boucher 1988: 308-9.

50 Lisa Elander, personal communication.

51 Bullit 2002.

interpretations of the Mahāsi tradition in its American incarnation.

The IMS community generally gives the proscriptions against sexual misconduct and intoxicants, in particular, much less scope and force than do Burmese renditions. To a large degree, these new interpretations were influenced by the context of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 70s, of which the first generation at IMS was very much a part. Unlike in Burma, the cultural mores of most American practitioners today do not prohibit sexual activity before marriage, for instance. As one teacher has put it, "Buddhists are required to avoid sexual misconduct, but it is not clear what this means in California."[52] Perhaps the time is ripe for a system of ethical guidelines around sexuality that will have value for people in this new context to emerge. On a number of occasions, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita has pointed out to me the poverty of this kind of restraint in America and the harmful effects this has on people.

Clearly, there is a place and a purpose for guidelines that encourage practitioners not to "harm others with their sexual energy," as Michele McDonald often renders the third precept. Indeed, the reasoning implicit and explicit in the Pāḷi discourses' presentations of *sīla* proves quite relevant to issues faced today.

> Abandoning sensual misconduct, he abstains from sensual misconduct. He does not get sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man.[53]

Seeing the pain and sense of betrayal in the eyes of a human being harmed by the lustful actions of another is one of the most excruciating experiences possible for those of us who try to

52 Hamilton 1995: 94.

53 Cunda Kammaraputta Sutta (A.X.176){V,264}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. The explanation which follows is drawn from the commentarial explanation on identical text at Sāleyyaka Sutta (M.41){I,286}, that is Mūlpaṇṇasa A{II,330}.

maintain an open heart. Sexual activity carries an extremely high emotional and social charge in modern American, as in ancient India. Whether positively or negatively, the way we use our sexuality strongly impacts our own well-being as well as that of the recipient of our advances, their spouses, partners, and family.

Thus, it is out of compassion that the Buddha offers this brief guidance for avoiding harm. According to the illuminating commentarial explanation of this discourse, the first line of advice is to avoid sexual relations with a person – such as a child – being raised, looked after, and provided with food, shelter, and clothing by their family. Secondly, we are warned against violating another's commitment not to engage in sexual relations, including those of nuns, monks, and meditators on retreat. Mentioned third is sexual activity 'entailing punishments', which means punishable by law and thus in the U.S. includes rape and relations with children under the age of consent, as well as sexual harassment.[54] Violating the trust between partners in a committed monogamous relationship is harmful, even so much as relations with a person engaged to be married; crowning with flowers in this discourse's original context approximates our Western custom of an engagement ring. Perhaps the fact that this discourse is directed to a man is in recognition of the fact that at least in terms of sexual misconduct, for instance rape, men are far more often the initiators. The Buddha throughout the Pāḷi describes action and reaction as a process of cause and effect. Accordingly, we might take this precept as advising whoever initiates sexual relations to be ware of the fact that certain sexual activity can cause tremendous grief and suffering, not least for oneself.

The question of how dedicated practitioners of *satipaṭṭhāna* should relate to psychoactive substances also raises contentious

54 There are indeed laws on the books in certain states regarding sexuality that have no justification in terms of the Buddha's teachings; it is also true that as long as such laws are in effect, violating them can have unhappy consequences.

problems of interpretation. There are two basic questions here: which types of substance use aid practice, if any; and, which types of substance use hinder practice, if any.

Sayadaw U Paṇḍita does not compromise on the fifth precept.

> Even in small amounts, intoxicating substances can make us less sensitive, more easily swayed by gross motivations of anger and greed. Some people defend the use of drugs and alcohol, saying that these substances are not so bad. On the contrary, they are very dangerous; they can lead even a good-hearted person into forgetfulness... Abstaining from intoxicants is therefore a way of protecting all the precepts.[55]

At least among European and American practitioners, there is some disagreement as to which substances, and how much of them, are prohibited by the precept against 'intoxicants that cause heedlessness'.[56] While I do not think that any of the senior teachers at IMS would advocate alcohol as a tool for awakening, for most of them it would be rather hypocritical to proscribe moderate social drinking as totally incompatible with dedicated practice. Again, the fact that these teachers are lay Americans seems to have a significant effect on their interpretations. American monks in other Theravādin traditions, such as Bhikkhus Bodhi and Thanissaro, agree that total abstention from alcohol is a necessary part of *sīla*, as does the Vipassanā community headed by the Indian lay teacher S.N. Goenka. The two monks spent much of their adult lives in Asia, and Mr. Goenka grew up there, so these teachers may have been heavily

---

55 Paṇḍita 1993: 12.

56 Cf. Vin.V.6:1{IV,110}, the rule forbidding monks to drink fermented liquor, on which Thanissaro 1994: Ch. 8, Part 6, that there is "some controversy as to what other substances would be included in this factor in line with the Great Standards. Since the Canon repeatedly criticizes alcohol on the grounds that it destroys one's sense of shame, weakens one's discernment, and can put one into a stupor... it seems reasonable to extend this rule to other intoxicants, narcotics, and hallucinogens as well. Thus things like marijuana, hashish, heroin, cocaine, and LSD would fulfill this factor. Coffee, tea, tobacco, and betel do not have this effect, though, so there is no reason to include them here."

influenced by Asian ideals of monasticism. In contrast, the lay teachers of IMS returned from their meditation practice to an American social context of friends and family structured to a much greater extent around European ideals. Perhaps their interpretations are more influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has not seen intoxicants and spirituality as mutually exclusive, prescribing wine for rituals such as communion and *kidush*, for instance.

Apparently, a number of Westerners today make psychoactive substances an active part of their 'spiritual' practice. In the fall of 1996, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* published an entire issue on "Buddhism & Psychedelics." An overwhelming majority of contributors, all of them native-born Americans, expressed the idea that not only had LSD been "a great gate to the dharma" for many, but that it also has a legitimate place in ongoing practice.[57] Even teachers who have practiced in the Mahāsi tradition were in support: "I would not be surprised if at some point there comes to be a useful marriage between some of these sacred materials and a systematic training or practice" of awakening "to the deepest levels of body and mind, and beyond that to the non-dual nature of reality," Jack Kornfield concluded.[58] Ram Dass was less circumspect:

> Buddhism is a good context for the psychedelic experience... I feel sad when society rejects something that can help it

57 Surya Das 1996: 43, "When I tried to discuss this sort of thing with my first Lama teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, in Nepal in 1991, he laughed and said "Western boy's dream!" and closed the discussion... I think it's interesting to note that when I get together with my fellow Western dharma teachers, and we consider how our personal paths began (in this life, at least) – very few willingly disclose that they actually entered the dharma through the portal of drugs, and the writings of A. Huxley, C. Casteneda, Ram Dass, T. Leary, R. D. Laing, etc. Yet I feel quite certain that psychedelic experience has been a great gate to the dharma for many of our generation."

58 On the whole, Kornfield 1996 was not as uncritically supportive of drug use as the quotation from page 40 might suggest. He cautions, 39, that psychedelics "can be easily abused if one is not careful about the set and the setting."

> understand itself and deepen its values and its wisdom... It's trying to hold on to what you've got rather than growing.[59]

These were not just isolated sentiments from aging Baby Boomers: of *Tricycle* readers responding to a questionnaire, 59% indicated that "psychedelics and Buddhism do mix," and "the age group that expressed the most confidence in a healthy mix was under 20," 90% of these young respondents indicating that "they would consider taking psychedelics in a sacred context."[60]

Michele McDonald was one of the only teachers representing the Mahāsi tradition in that issue of *Tricycle* who unambiguously judged psychoactive substances to be a hindrance rather than an aid to awakening. While causing varying amounts of physical and mental harm, drugs do have the power to move one into different states of consciousness. Freedom, however, is not about any achieving any particular experience.

> In retreat you're going through sleepiness, restlessness – you're not aiming to maintain a certain state. At least in vipassanā practice, which is what I teach, it's not state-oriented. The idea is that freedom isn't based on any experience, so you're developing an awareness that isn't imprisoned by being attached to certain experiences.[61]

Though some of us teased her about this interview, comparing it to Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, McDonald faithfully represents here the overwhelming conclusion of the Theravādin tradition. The Pāḷi texts do report the Buddha describing wrong action in many contexts without

---

59 Ram Dass et. al. 1995: 108-9.

60 Tricycle 1996: 44. Coleman 2001: 201, makes an interesting observation that "eighty percent of the members of the two Tibetan groups in my sample said they had used psychedelics – a significantly higher figure than for Zen or Vipassana groups..."

61 McDonald 1996: 67-70, also comments that she is "quite concerned" about the dangerous use of drugs by young people, especially since "the context of spiritual values and intimacy that was connected to the drug culture in our generation is lacking." Context defines how the experience of intoxication as well as the experience of insight are integrated and related to in a human life.

referring to intoxicants at all, but in others he points out the many dangers that come from use of intoxicants.[62] Nowhere, in fact, does the Buddha of the Pāḷi advocate any kind of psychoactive substance as conducive to awakening. If Scott Hajicek-Dobberstein is right, "the Vedic soma cult – or something very similar to it – survived among the tantric Buddhist siddhas who lived in India from the eight to the tenth century C.E.".[63] In any case, such practices have not been part of the Theravādin tradition, which demonstrates once again the danger of misrepresentation inherent in speaking or thinking in terms of 'the Buddhist tradition'.

To which 'Buddhism' is Terrence McKenna referring?

> I would almost say, 'How can you be a serious Buddhist if you're not exploring psychedelics?' Then you're sort of an armchair Buddhist, a Buddhist from theory, a Buddhist from practice, but it's sort of a training wheels practice. I mean, the real thing is, take the old boat out and give it a spin.[64]

What McKenna seems to be suggesting – perhaps I misunderstand his point – is that 'Buddhist' practice involves

62 Only three kinds of wrong action are presented at A.X.176{V,264ff}: killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, followed by the four verbal actions and three mental actions of the *kammapatha* formulation discussed in note 40 above. Cf. A.V.6, M.117, S.XLV.8, etc. However, in the Vipaka Sutta (A.VIII.40){IV,248}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, we read, "The drinking of fermented & distilled liquors -- when indulged in, developed, & pursued -- is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades. The slightest of all the results coming from drinking fermented & distilled liquors is that, when one becomes a human being, it leads to mental derangement." Likewise D.31{III,182}, trans. Nārada Thera, "There are, young householder, these six evil consequences in indulging in intoxicants which cause infatuation and heedlessness: loss of wealth, increase of quarrels, susceptibility to disease, earning an evil reputation, shameless exposure of body, weakening of intellect." Are these effects of drug and alcohol use evident in North America?

63 Scott Hajicek-Dobberstein apparently found evidence that Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva also agreed "We need to eat the alchemical medicine." "Some Siddhas and Alchemical Enlightenment: psychedelic mushrooms in Buddhist tradition," *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* (1995), cited by Fields 1996.

64 McKenna 1996: 97.

trying to have as many experiences or as many exotic or challenging experiences as possible. Such is not the Theravādin path of bringing mindfulness to whatever is arising in the present moment, without judgment of or preference for any particular experience. When concentration is strong, plenty of intense high and low experiences do arise; serious practitioners of *satipaṭṭhāna* find that there is no need to push the boat in order to 'give it a spin'. The beauty of the Theravāda's 'middle path' lies in its simplicity: neither grasping after nor pushing away any experience.

Some would suggest that exploration of psychedelics for awakening is outdated, that substances such as DMT and 5-MeO-DMT show more promise. In the course of a clinical research program studying DMT, Rick Strassman found that certain volunteers underwent "the deepest and most profound experience of their lives" while on the drug. Strassman shared his findings with leaders of a Zen community with which he had a long-time affiliation, and published an article in the 1996 issue of *Tricycle* on psychedelics in which he suggested that

> ...dedicated pracitioners with little success in their meditation, but well along in moral and intellectual development, might benefit from a carefully timed, prepared, supervised, and followed-up psychedelic session to accelerate their practice.[65]

Though initally receptive, Strassman's Zen teachers ultimately warned him that

> An attempt to induce enlightenment by chemical means can never, will never, suceed. What it will do is badly confuse people and result in serious consequences for you.[66]

Feeling personally betrayed, Strassman concluded that "organized religion, no matter how mystically inclined, [is not] open-minded and secure enough to consider the spiritual potential of clinical research with psychedelics."[67] Is this why

65 Strassman 2003 quoting his own *Tricycle* article.

66 Personal communication quoted in Strassman 2003.

67 Strassman 2003.

Theravādin masters reject the idea of substance-induced enlightenment, or are there more legitimate reasons? In a recent interview, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita was adamant that Buddha's teachings are only effective if practiced "in the original way."

> It's fine to use practical scientific examples to get young people interested in coming to practice. If, however, one inserts the methods of the physical sciences into the *Sāsana*, it will get diluted. If scientific methods, which prioritize the material, are thrown in, it will decay.
>
> Really, the method of *satipaṭṭhāna* is very simple, being mindful of whatever arises is simple, but with this simple practice one will come across truly amazing things. There's no need to insert any other methods.
>
> What I mean to say is that using drugs or machines to help gain insight, *vipassanā-ñāṇa*, will not work. One yogi at this current retreat said, 'It would be great if there were a pill to make insight arise'. There is nothing like that that will work.[68]

Were psychoactive substances omitted from the practice as described in the Pāḷi texts simply because DMT and the like were not available in ancient India? The Theravādin tradition maintains that the Buddha in fact did not see any drug as an effective vehicle for full liberation from suffering. Many Western teachers of meditation did indeed gain initial inspiration from views afforded them by experiements with psychedelics; clearly these substances can elicit intense – if brief – concentration, and profoundly affect how people think about themselves and the world. Nonetheless, it is not at all clear that the views provided by psychedelics correspond to clear seeing of the process of sensation arising and passing. Awakening, according to the Mahāsi tradition, is possible only through this type of direct insight; transformation of conceptual content – even visions so profound as the dissolution of subject and object into oneness – cannot achieve the goal.[69] In the Pāḷi, the Buddha urges people follow a practice that is applicable anywhere, anytime, that

68 Paṇḍita 2003.

69 Please see the discussion on pp.225ff.

depends on nothing other than the flow of sensation. The simplicity of pure mindfulness practice is a refuge: just trying to apply awareness to whatever experiences arise. Such a practice is as applicable in modern America as it was in ancient India. As the Buddha defines it in the Pāḷi, the true *Dhamma* has this characteristic of *akāliko*: it is timeless.

A Practical Imperative

Burmese monks often encourage skillful conduct by declaring that a person who abides by the precepts is guaranteed rebirth in the human or divine realms, while breaking the five precepts results in rebirth in the realms of woe as hungry ghosts, animals, and such.[70] Certain discourses in the Pāḷi do indeed make such a suggestion.[71] On further inquiry, however, these texts clearly do not imply that a person has only one chance: the serial killer Aṅgulimāla reportedly undertook the *sīla* of a monk and gained full awakening after meeting the Buddha. Likewise, I have heard monks explain to both Burmese and Western audiences how to re-establish purity of conduct anew at the beginning of a retreat, in order to create the conditions for concentration to develop. Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa pointed out, to English speaking practitioners for whom I was interpreting, that everybody makes mistakes from time to time, so that part of the practice is realizing where one has gone wrong and refraining from doing it again.[72]

70 E.g. Paṇḍita 1993: 243, quoted on p..

71 E.g. Vipaka Sutta (A.VIII.40){IV,247}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Stealing... Illicit sexual behavior... Telling falsehoods... Divisive tale-bearing... Harsh speech... Frivolous chattering... The drinking of fermented & distilled liquors... -- when indulged in, developed, & pursued -- is something that leads to hell, leads to rebirth as a common animal, leads to the realm of the hungry shades."

72 Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa, Kyaswa Foreign Yogi Retreat, Kyaswa Monastery, Sagaing Hills, Upper Burma, January 2002.

Among Burmese Mahāsi practitioners, discrepancies between absolute interpretations of the precepts and actions such as eradicating pests are rarely considered. If no more free of hypocrisy, Americans nonetheless seem to make more of an effort at appearing consistent and at logically justifying their actions. Not surprisingly, Burmese demonstrate much less allegiance to the 'rationality' defined by the European Enlightenment; when questioned, most simply shrug off inconsistencies that would be intolerable for many Americans. In the Burmese education system, at both monasteries and government schools, that kind of rationality is given much less importance than respectful memorization of the teachers' pronouncements. Through many years of experience, Steven Smith has come to recognize the great benefit that Burmese practitioners gain just through reciting the precepts: they cultivate skillful intentions to live a better life. Burmese take great joy in reciting the precepts in Pāḷi, especially led by a monk, regardless of how long they will be able to keep a vow such as not to eat after noon. As second-generation immigrants from Buddhist cultures become more immersed in the American philosophical context, however, they tend to lose this attitude. Paul Numrich relates how at a traditional robe-offering ceremony at a Thai temple in Chicago he "overheard a Thai teenager complain to her friend during a corporate chanting of Pali stanzas, 'I don't even know what we're saying!'"[73]

To gain initial acceptance in the American context, then, teachings must be logically and empirically justified according to American standards. Whereas the Burmese tradition emphasizes rebirth in heaven or hell realms depending on one's conduct, teachers in Barre often speak of a kind of 'psychological rebirth' into states of anguish and guilt or those of joy and satisfaction. Such presentations resonate with people's experience regardless of whether their philosophical perspective allows for existence

73 Numrich 1996: 106.

after the end of a lifetime. Moreover, the standard Theravādin rendition evidently reminds Americans of mythological representations of heaven and of eternal damnation. Most Asians do not seem to react negatively to such presentations, but many Americans do. The idea of rebirth according to the skillfulness of one's actions make sense to quite a few, but it does seem to inspire in many Americans feelings of guilt, self-judgment, and self-hatred. Since it is clear that almost everyone is subject to pleasant and unpleasant psychological rebirths, this understanding apparently inspires less comparison and judgment about others' or one's own failings.

Perhaps because American students are generally more prone to guilt and more sensitive to moralistic hypocrisy than their counterparts in Burma, teachers at IMS are want to emphasize a practical sense of 'nonharming', rather than absolute rules of conduct. The book *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom* is a collection of Joseph Goldstein's responses to practitioners' questions; the fact that it contains only one explicit reference to the "ethical precepts" is indicative of American interests. "All the suffering" involved in "murder, rape, torture, starvation, national hatreds," Goldstein says, "has its roots in people's minds, in our own mind." Presenting the five "training precepts" taught by the Buddha as a means to "abandon this level of suffering," as a "great protection from these kinds of harmful acts," he asks us to "imagine how different the world would be if everyone followed just part *one* of these precepts – not to kill other human beings."[74]

74 The reference to this formulation on page 12 of Goldstein 1993c, is the only instance of "precepts" listed in the index. "Morality" is mentioned once briefly on page 15 as the first part of the threefold training: "we need to practice and refine our ability to live honestly and with integrity." The entry "non-harming," refers to these same pages. Whereas a Burmese teacher might rely on the explicit, negative formulation of the first precept, the reference to "mosquito" on page 148 offers an implicit, positive rendition of skillful conduct: "The mosquito buzzes. Can we hear the sound, know the feeling and thoughts that arise in the mind, see the desire to call in the SWAT team, and be aware enough to exercise compassion?"

Presentations by teachers at IMS emphasize the practical effects of skillful conduct primarily in one's 'world of experience', but also in the larger world. One Pāḷi discourse speaks of skillful conduct as a gift to all beings, pointing out that not causing harm is never blameworthy.

> There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life... abstains from taking what is not given... abstains from illicit sex... abstains from lying... abstains from taking intoxicants... In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is [a] gift, [a] great gift – original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning – that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & priests.[75]

A movement has grown up in the American context extending certain concepts from the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna, such as *sīla*, to what I would suggest are in fact Greco-Judaic ideals of social action and social transformation; such interpretations are discussed in the section below on 'Engaged' 'Buddhism'. Teachings that prioritize action for societal good do seem comfortable and 'right' to many Americans, of course. This should come as no surprise if the values of 'Engaged Buddhism' derive fundamentally from these Westerners' own intellectual tradition, albeit couched in 'Buddhist' terms. The Buddha's discourses in the Pāḷi texts, in contrast, focus on liberation within an individual's 'world of experience'. For this reason, the type of skillful conduct that "leads to the cessation of suffering" is defined primarily in psychological terms: "Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, &

75 Abhisanda Sutta (A.VIII.39){IV,245}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

intellect."[76] Likewise, unskillful action is declared "to be threefold: as caused by greed, caused by hatred and caused by delusion."[77] Thus, one discourse defines *sīla* in terms of what is "To Be Cultivated and Not to Be Cultivated."

> Such bodily... verbal... mental conduct as causes unwholesome states to increase and wholesome states to diminish in one who cultivates it should not be cultivated. But such bodily... verbal... mental conduct as causes unwholesome states to diminish and wholesome states to increase in one who cultivates it should be cultivated.[78]

If the more external manifestations of *sīla* differ somewhat across cultural contexts, the psychological reasons for guidelines about skillful conduct appear practically identical. Thus, even if in certain areas the conclusions that the authors of the Commentaries reached in their particular historical moments do not 'work' for modern Americans, the hermeneutical principles by which they arrived at those conclusions may well be applicable at IMS. In a Pāḷi discourse rejecting the Brahmans' justification of their own supremacy, the Buddha clarifies how the practice of restraint is applicable to any of the diverse cultural contexts he was acquainted with. He notes that there may be a person from any caste who

> refrains from taking life, from taking what is not given, from committing sexual misconduct, from telling lies, from indulging in slander, from harsh speech or idle chatter, is not grasping, malicious, or of wrong views. Thus such things as are moral and considered so, to be followed and considered so, ways befitting an Ariyan [noble person] and considered so, bright with bright results and praised by the wise, are to be found among the Khattiyas, and likewise among Brahmins, merchants and artisans...[79]

---

76 Nibbedhika Sutta (A.VI.63){III,415}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

77 Kammanidāna Sutta (A.X.174){V,261}, trans. Ñāṇapoṇika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

78 Sevitabbāsevitabba Sutta (M.114){III,46ff}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

79 Aggañña Sutta (D.27){III,82ff}, trans. Maurice Walshe. Since the Brahmins based their claim to supremacy on their birth from *Brahmā's* mouth, this

Sayadaw U Paṇḍita concurs.

> In this world there is no greater adornment than purity of conduct, no greater refuge, and no other basis for the flowering of insight and wisdom. Sīla brings a beauty that is not plastered onto the outside, but instead comes from the heart and is reflected in the entire person. Suitable for everyone, regardless of age, station or circumstance, truly it is the adornment of all seasons. So please be sure to keep your virtue fresh and alive.[80]

The teachers cited here assert reasons for skillful conduct that would be common to practitioners in Burma and Barre. However, there are significant differences between cultural sensibilities, and therefore in the style and wording used in American teachers' reflections on the place of morality. Sylvia Boorstien writes of how memories of past unskillful actions often come up with great force as a practitioner begins to settle into concentration.

> I think the heart waits for a time when there's enough space in the mind to bring up for reflection and possible correction the errors we have made through unskillful behavior. I think the shelf-life of guilt and remorse is very long. I can remember incorrect things that I did a very long time ago... Even when we recognize that whatever we did, intentionally or unintentionally, was karmically determined (we couldn't have done otherwise), even when that understanding allows us to forgive ourselves, we still wish we hadn't done it.[81]

Remorse for unskillful actions is not limited to American society, however, nor to modern times. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita expresses a traditional Theravādin position on harmful actions, such as killing.

> One may indeed avoid punishment at the hands of external authorities, but there is no escape from the self-punishment [of

---

discourse asserting the equality of different castes is named "On Knowledge of Beginnings."

80 Paṇḍita 1993: 13.

81 Boorstein 1999a: 208. I am not convinced, however, that the Pāḷi really defines the law of *kamma* to mean that actions are "determined" in the sense that "we couldn't have done otherwise." Please see the discussion on pp. 185ff.

> guilt and remorse]. The honest knowledge that you have done wrong is very painful. You are always your own best witness; you can never hide from yourself. Nor is there escape from the miserable rebirths, as an animal, in hell realms, as a hungry ghost. Once an act has been committed, kamma has the potential to bear fruit. If the fruit does not ripen in this life, it will follow you until sometime in the future. The crooked path leads to all these kinds of danger.[82]

My suggestion is that *sīla* can be skillfully elucidated and practiced in many different contexts through a return to the source, to the principles employed by ancient and modern masters of the Eightfold Noble Path. According to the Pāḷi texts and Burmese tradition, as well contemporary teachers at IMS, skillful conduct serves as the basis for the development of all the faculties that lead to the final goal of the Buddha's teachings. Though Americans may generally be more prone to feeling guilty about past unskillful actions they have committed, while Burmese might be more likely to feel joy about the unskillful things they have refrained from, the practical reason for disciplined conduct in these different contexts is precisely the same as in the historical moment when the Pāḷi discourses were composed.

> Discipline is for the sake of restraint, restraint for the sake of freedom from remorse, freedom from remorse for the sake of joy, joy for the sake of rapture, rapture for the sake of tranquility, tranquility for the sake of pleasure, pleasure for the sake of concentration, concentration for the sake of knowledge and vision of things as they are, knowledge and vision of things as they are for the sake of disenchantment, disenchantment for the sake of dispassion, dispassion for the sake of release, release for the sake of knowledge and vision of release, knowledge and vision of release for the sake of total [*nibbāna*] without clinging.[83]

82 Paṇḍita 1993: 222-3.

83 Parivāra.XII.2{V,164}, trans. Thanissaro 1994: intro.

V

Learning

what is heard

> Second, we must water the seed. This means listening to discourses on the Dhamma and reading texts, then carefully applying the understanding we have gained. Just as overwatering will rot a seed, our goal here is only clarification. It is definitely not to bewilder ourselves, getting lost in a maze of concepts. This second protection is called *sutā·nuggahita*.[1]

Sayadaw U Paṇḍita often describes theoretical understanding of the practice as a guide for the journey of meditation. Over the course of the *Buddha-Sāsana*, emphasis has oscillated between concentrated practice and scriptural study, as we shall see. For the most part, even proponents of mindfulness meditation such as the Mahāsi Sayadaw have felt that a certain amount of theoretical guidance from a teaching lineage is necessary for successful practice. American teachers of mindfulness meditation give various interpretations, some presenting the practice strictly in a Theravādin framework, others referring not at all to the Buddha or to traditional accounts of his teachings. Are any particular understandings necessary for effective mindfulness meditation? If so, which ones?

1 Paṇḍita 1993: 23. The caution about "overwatering... getting lost in a maze of concepts," does not appear to be from the original Burmese.

The practice culminates in an escape from views, as is clear in a few places in the Pāḷi.[2] In one discourse, the wanderer Vacchagotta asks a series of metaphysical questions of the Buddha, who replies that he does not hold any of these ideas in the sense "only this is true, anything else is wrong."

> "Vaccha, the speculative view that the world is eternal... not eternal... finite... infinite... The soul and body are the same... The soul is one thing and the body another... After death a Tathāgata exists... does not exist... both exists and does not exist... neither exists nor does not exist is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, a fetter of views. It is beset by suffering, by vexation, by despair, and by fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. Seeing this danger, I do not take up any of these speculative views."
>
> "Then does Master Gotama hold any speculative view at all?"
>
> "Vaccha, 'speculative view' is something the Tathāgata has put away. For the Tathāgata, Vaccha, has seen this: 'Such is material form, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling... perception... formations... consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance. Therefore, I say, with the destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up, and relinquishing of all conceivings, all excogitations, all I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency to conceit, the Tathāgata is liberated through not clinging."[3]

---

2 E.g. Diṭṭhi Sutta (A.X.93){V,188}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, where Anathapiṇḍika tells some wanderers, "Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it actually is present, I also discern the higher escape from it as it actually is present."

3 Aggivacchagotta Sutta (M.72){I,485}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, who note in the endnotes, 1277, that "in the Pali a word play is involved between *diṭṭhigata*, "speculative view," which the Tathāgata has put away, and *diṭṭha*, what has been "seen" by the Tathāgata with direct vision, namely, the rise and fall of the five aggregates."

In meditation practice, the very process guided by the teachings must culminate in their abandonment. Steven Smith relates an illustrative instance from deep retreat. Having developed strongly concentrated mindfulness, he was instructed by Sayadaw U Paṇḍita to let go of the whole practice, to do nothing. Steven describes how he would go into each successive interview asking whether he should return to particular practices he had been instructed in before, but U Paṇḍita would just reply again and again, "Don't do anything."[4] In one well-known discourse, the Buddha refers to the folly of a man who carries his raft with him after reaching the far shore. "Just so, bhikkhus, the Dhamma I have taught is like a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding on to... You should abandon through understanding even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings."[5]

'Right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', 'should' and 'should not' are funny words. An absolute definition of 'good' requires some first principle or creator being to lay it down. In the Pāḷi, the Buddha describes reality not as controlled by an omnipotent being, but rather as a beginingless process of cause and effect: "From the arising of this comes the arising of that... From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that."[6] In this philosophical context, words such as 'good', 'should', 'wholesome', or 'skillful' only really have meaning in the sense of being 'effective to achieve some goal'. The Buddha of the Pāḷi texts is very clear about the goal of his teachings; he defines as *kusala*, 'skillful', those things that lead away from suffering.[7]

'Right' view, in the terms of the Pāḷi, is a view that leads to the end of views – the end of suffering. Many Theravādin texts are devoted to describing certain understandings that that allow one

4 Personal communication, November 2002.

5 M.22{I,135}, author's trans., but concurring with many of the glosses by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Cf. note 7 on p.38.

6 Bhaya (Vera) Sutta (A.X.92){V,182}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

7 E.g. Sāḷha Sutta (A.III.66){I,196}.

to practice the other seven factors of the Eightfold Noble Path in a balanced and correct way. Theoretical knowledge is among the "requisite conditions" for wisdom to develop in a practitioner, according to the "Paññā Sutta."

> One has heard a great deal, retained what has been heard, stored up what has been heard. The teachings good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, that – with their wording and with their aim – proclaim the spiritual life entirely complete & pure: that sort of teachings one has heard a great deal of, retained, discussed, accumulated, examined with one's mind, & penetrated well with one's views. This is the fifth cause, the fifth condition that leads to the acquiring of the wisdom basic to the spiritual life that is as yet unquired, and to the increase, abundance, cultivation, & completion of that which has already been acquired.[8]

Theory And Practice

Many Burmese take descriptions of right view rather absolutely, particularly the conclusions of Theravādin commentators such as Buddhaghosa. Taking language to be absolute, some pluck certain ideas out of one 'language-game' and misguidedly argue their merits based on another set of logical rules. The danger involved, for instance, in Burmese speakers misinterpreting and denouncing Freud's concept of 'ego', or Americans misunderstanding and rejecting the

8 Paññā Sutta (A.VIII.2), author's trans. I prefer Bhikkhu Ñāṇaponika's simpler and more commonly recognized gloss of *kalyāṇā*, 'good'. However, since *sa-* adds a meaning of 'possessed of' or 'with', rather than 'right' (*saddhamma* is from *sad=sant* (good, true) + *dhamma*), Ñāṇaponika's slightly more absolutist rendering of *sātthaṃ sabyañjanaṃ* seems unwarranted: "Such teachings as are good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing..." (My emphasis). Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "sa[3]," 655; *s.v.* "saddhamma," 675; *s.v.* "sāttha," 703. Thus my translation closely agrees in many places with that by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

Theravādin idea of 'rebirth', illustrates precisely why Steiner advocates a careful return to the source. Certainly, many traditions have abstracted certain aspects of the Buddha's teachings, holding them in just the sense rejected time and again in the discouses: "Only this is truth, all else is foolishness."[9] Especially in relatively static and homogenous social contexts, the Pāḷi texts have often been interpreted to dictate a single correct view.

While absolutism crops up everywhere, on the whole, practitioners at IMS have been less willing to take the teachings in this way. The diverse and dynamic social context of the U.S. brings Americans into contact with other intelligent people who hold starkly different viewpoints, making absolute claims about conceptual interpretations of reality more problematic. Taking particular Burmese, Tibetan, or Japanese traditions of 'Buddhism' to be merely so many skillful means, Americans have not hesitated to introduce alternative presentations. Some teachers have relied heavily on Western traditions, such as the healing professions, for their vocabulary and framework. Jon Kabat-Zinn, for one, has pioneered the application of *satipaṭṭhāna* in a very secular context, the American hospital.

> Mindfulness is basically just a particular way of paying attention. It is a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of self-inquiry and self-understanding. For this reason it can be learned and practiced, as we do in the stress clinic, without appealing to Oriental culture or Buddhist authority to enrich or authenticate it.[10]

---

9 Araṇavibhanga Sutta (M.139){III,235}, author's trans.

10 Kabat-Zinn 1990: 12-13, continues, "Mindfulness stands on its own as a powerful vehicle for self-understanding and healing. In fact one of its major strengths is that it is not dependent on any belief system or ideology, so that its benefits are therefore accessible for anyone to test for himself or herself. Yet it is no accident that mindfulness comes out of Buddhism, which has as its overriding concerns the relief of suffering and the dispelling of illusions." My analysis throughout seeks to elucidate to what degree *satipaṭṭhāna* really is 'universal'.

Instructions for the establishment of mindfulness are remarkably similar at the University Massachusetts Medical Center and at the Mahāsi center in Rangoon. Moreover, by recognizing its potential for physical healing, Kabat-Zinn has made more visible a virtue of the practice emphasized by Burmese monks as well as by the Buddha in the Pāḷi. Indeed, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita can be somewhat extreme in prescribing meditation for dangerous diseases. He often cites cases of patients "declared incurable by doctors" that have meditated under his guidance and achieved spontaneous regression of cancer, tuberculosis, and high blood pressure.[11] As Andrew Olendzki notes,

> if the classical Buddhist tradition would consider the applications of mindfulness meditation to contemporary healing protocols as something short of the final goal of liberation, it would presumably be quite consistent with and uncritical of the notion that the medicine of Dhamma is capable of relieving suffering wherever it is found.[12]

The Clinic, then, has extended the potential of the Buddha's teachings by offering some of their benefits to people who might have had no other introduction.

Do such secular renditions complete the other half of Steiner's reciprocity, making the "autonomous virtues of the original more precisely visible"? If mindfulness meditation's "essence is universal," as Kabat-Zinn puts it, the practice evidently can be divorced from traditional understandings. The Pāḷi texts, however, like most modern Theravādins, are quite adamant that *satipaṭṭhāna* brings full relief from suffering only as part of the Eightfold Noble Path: right view, right aim, right speech, right action, and right livelihood, as well as right effort,

---

11 Paṇḍita 1993: 55-6; 166-170. "All of these people had to go through tremendous pain. But they exercised enormous perseverance and courageous effort, and they healed themselves. More important, many also came to understand far more deeply the truth about reality by observing pain with tenacious courage and then breaking through to insight," 56.

12 Olendzki 2000: 325.

right mindfulness, and right concentration. To the extent that participants in stress reduction programs engage all of these Path factors, they may indeed be practicing the same "way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of self-inquiry and self-understanding" that the Buddha did. Exclusively secular applications of mindfulness may be very beneficial, but they are different from the practice taught by the Buddha in the Pāḷi, and do not lead to the same goal.

Since the American medical establishment has traditionally excluded itself from prescribing 'religious' or 'ethical' conduct for patients, however, the Stress Reduction Clinic would likely be overstepping its bounds were it to emphasize the dangers of unskillful action in the Theravādin sense. Aside from some remarks on substance addiction, Kabat-Zinn's popular book *Full Catastrophe Living* makes no mention of skillful conduct as a basis for successful mindfulness meditation. The Pāḷi texts, on the other hand, describe right speech, right action, and right livelihood as requisite in order to gain the benefits of the practice, as the section on "Conduct" has detailed.

Another conspicuous difference between the Mahāsi Sayadaw's presentation and more secular ones appears in the areas of right view and right aim. In particular, Burmese monks consistently and explicitly teach the practice for the purpose of full liberation from suffering; they give instructions for cultivating one's 'world of experience' through to its un-binding, *nir-vāṇa*. Kabat-Zinn emphasizes the importance of attitude and intention, but gives a much broader definition of right resolve.

> I used to think that meditation practice was so powerful in itself and so healing that as long as you did it all, you would see growth and change. But time has taught me that some kind of personal vision is also necessary.... This image or ideal will help carry you through the inevitable periods of low motivation and give continuity to your practice... For some that vision might be one

> of vibrancy and health, for others it might be one of relaxation or kindness or peacefulness or harmony or wisdom.[13]

Sharf's analysis, while overstated in regard to the Mahāsi movement in Burma, does seem true of certain American presentations.

> The rationalization of meditation, coupled with Western values of the middle class patrons of urban meditation centers, led naturally to a de-emphasis on the traditional soteriological goal – bringing an end to rebirth. Instead, we find an increasing emphasis on the worldly benefits of meditation: *vipassanā* was said to increase physical and psychological health, to alleviate stress, to help one deal more effectively with family and business relationships, and so on.[14]

---

13 Kabat-Zinn 1990: 46.

14 Sharf 1995: 258-9, prefaces this comment, "Meditation had traditionally comprised the reenactment of the Buddha's spiritual exertions through the ritual recitation of meditation liturgies. The *vipassanā* revival, coupled with the "Protestant" ideology of the Theravāda reforms, had the effect of rationalizing meditation; meditation was now conceived not as the ritual instantiation of Buddhahood, nor as a means to accumulate merit, but rather as a "mental discipline" designed to engender a particular transformative experience." If Sharf is referring to the modern Theravāda when he describes what 'meditation has traditionally comprised', his argument may have some merit. The 'tradition' at the time the Pāḷi texts were composed, on the other hand, quite explicitly advocated concentrated mindfulness practice, as I argue in the chapter on "Insight." The Mahāsi Sayadaw continued this early tradition, advocating *satipaṭṭhāna* practice as a means of emulating the Buddha's own method of gaining full awakening.

Sharf concludes by asserting that seeing worldly benefits in meditation "represents the final collapse of the traditional distinction between mundane and supramundane goals – the distinction that served to legitimize the institution of the lay-supported *saṅgha*." This last assertion is particularly questionable, since lay practice of *dāna* and *sīla* was consistently presented as a means to full awakening. Gombrich and Obeyersekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, 237, make a similar argument, though, "The untraditional nature of such daily practice by the laity cannot be overemphasized. Whether they meditate daily or not, the clients of meditation centers are popping in and out of their ordinary lay life with its worldly concerns, and it is inevitable that they soon come to regard meditation as something besides progress towards salvation: it can also help them improve their lives. For the first time meditation is thus seen as *instrumental*, a means to success in ordinary life."

Concentration, whether through absorption such as in lovingkindness or through continuous mindfulness, can indeed temporarily relieve stress and suffering. At certain stages of mindfulness practice, moreover, fear and insecurity can be drastically reduced, giving practitioners newfound ease in personal relationships. In the practice taught by the Mahāsi Sayadaw, however, one faces periods of overwhelming terror as well as waves of joy, acute boredom as well as intense stimulation; suffering can be cured only by developing skillful conduct, concentration, and wisdom with the entire range of experience. The inspiration and persistence necessary for successful practice, in Barre as well as in Burma, derives from a clear sense of purpose, as Joseph Goldstein points out.

> Today, in the West, the idea of having goals in spiritual practice has drawn some fire.. Although this has been a corrective move for ambitious ego striving and the comparing, judging mind, it has also lost something of immense value... It is precisely our vision of the summit that inspires our journey in the first place. To lose the vision, the sense of possibility, is to narrow our view and limit our endeavor.[15]

This approach follows Pāḷi discourses such as the "Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta," in which the Buddha details the practice of establishing mindfulness. The commentary notes that he chose to give this "deep teaching" to the villagers of Kammāsadhamma in the Kuru country because they were exceptionally well endowed with physical and emotional health, as well as skillful conduct. In the discourse, the Buddha describes the establishment of mindfulness in many different aspects of experience, but concludes by emphasizing that this path is "*ekāyano*", 'one-going': a single way, not many different ones; an inner path of solitude, that we each have to travel by ourselves; an unparallelled route, going alone to its particular destination.[16]

15 Goldstein 2002: 39.
16 DA.22{III,741ff}.

> Solitary is this path, bhikkhus, for the purification of beings, for going beyond sorrow and grief, for the passing of pain and distress, for arriving at the way, for the realization of Nibbāna...[17]

This kind of full stress elimination is the goal of *satipaṭṭhāna*, according to the Theravādin tradition.

Burmese meditation masters with whom I have discussed this issue generally feel that it is important that teachers have a correct theoretical understanding of the stages and dynamics of practice, so that students are well guided and encouraged not to stop short of the goal. Nonetheless, extensive theoretical study by practitioners is not considered necessary for success.[18] Sharf notes that modern Vipassanā teachers have emphasized personal experience to the exclusion of scriptural study. There is indeed quite a consensus between American and Burmese teachers about the fact that little theoretical knowledge is required of a practitioner. The Mahāsi Sayadaw set the tone for this tradition:

> The yogi who practices under the guidance of a learned teacher need not bother about higher Buddhist philosophy for he can follow the teacher's instructions if he knows only that life is a mental and physical process characterized by impermanence, suffering and insubstantiality.[19]

This basic understanding can be presented in terms of the transitory nature of a lifetime, the suffering of death, and the lack

---

17 Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D.22){II,315}, author's trans. Maurice Walshe's translation "there is this one way..." captures some of the ambiguity of '*ekāyano*', but moves the original emphasis on 'one way' over towards 'this'. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita has described to me on many occasions how he found out the hard way that Americans do not like the idea of there being only one way to anything. On recieving a book of translations by the American monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu one time, Sayadaw turned directly to the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta and finding the gloss "direct path," remarked with a grin, "Americans don' t like 'only way'."

18 The Shwe Taung U Sayadaw, who as a young novice cut off one of his fingers out of devotion to the Buddha, told me that it didn't really matter if people studied the Pāḷi at all since he knew of many successful practitioners who were illiterate. "But," he said, "it is possible to miss the goal. That can happen."

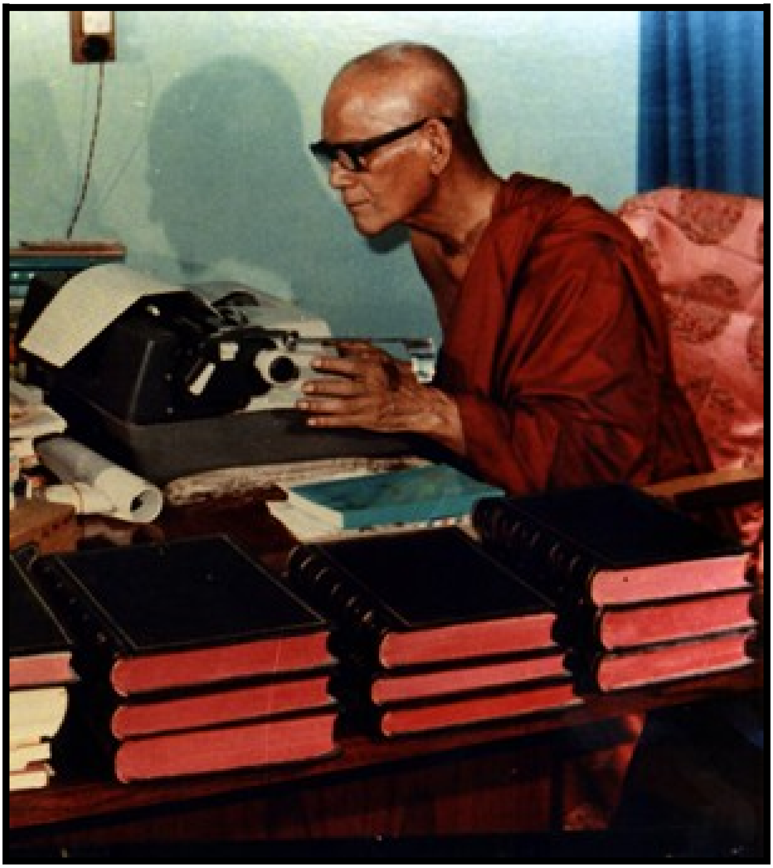
19 Mahāsi 1982: 248.

of any permanent aspect of personal identity, for instance, so as to be quite obvious even at an abstract level. Such initiatory, inspirational kinds of right view depend on conceptual thought, but the practice culminates with direct knowing of the characteristics of existence pointed to by the textual descriptions of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and nonself (*anattā*). While talks and instruction can provide inspiration and balance, the general understanding in the Mahāsi tradition is that practitioners need not study any elaborate theoretical framework. What must be known must be known directly.

Many Burmese nuns and monks might differ with certain American teachers, however, over what theoretical material the instructors themselves need to study in order to guide practitioners. Few American teachers actually have more than a cursory understanding of the psycho-physical Abhidhamma analysis that the Mahāsi Sayadaw was assuming, in the remark above, that the teacher would use as a basis from which to guide students. When students encounter difficulties outside of a particular American teacher's own experience, ideas from many different, and disparate, traditions may be called in. Though there are exceptions on both sides, presentations in Barre in general have been much more eclectic, if only out of necessity, since American audiences do not share the Theravādin vocabulary. Whereas almost all the published talks by the Mahāsi Sayadaw are based on a specific discourse from the Pāḷi, for instance, teachers at IMS often pick a subject such as 'working with anger' or the 'hindrances to practice', and then liberally weave together ideas from psychologists, poets, and religious figures of many different traditions, as well as their own experience.[20] The Mahāsi tradition in the West has "tended to

20 In part, this topical approach may be inherited from U Paṇḍita, who often selects a particular aspect of practice addressed in the texts and then uses various Pāḷi discourses and commentaries to address his main point. Nonetheless, while U Paṇḍita does relate his own experience in his talks, he almost never draws significantly from intellectual traditions other than the

become more diffuse" than other Vipassanā traditions, such as that of U Ba Khin.[21]



The late Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw at work,
stacks of Pāḷi texts by his side

In this eclectic environment, lineage seems to be given much less importance than in the Burmese Theravāda, the Tibetan Vajrayāna, or the Japanese Zen schools, which have all emphasized the importance of transmission from teacher to student beginning with the Buddha. Though the practice being taught by the senior teachers at IMS is basically that propagated

---

Theravāda.

21 Batchelor 1994: 344-52.

by the Mahāsi Sayadaw, and despite the fact that anyone teaching in this tradition is at most three or four generations removed from him, I have found that many practitioners and even staff in Barre do not know the Mahāsi Sayadaw's name. In contrast, almost everyone who comes to IMS is familiar with the name and face of the Dalai Lama. This is due in part to the Dalai Lama's popularity in the mass media, but the articles and interviews featured in the IMS community magazine over the past six years apparently mentioned this Tibetan teacher more often than they brought attention to the Burmese monk who made the mindfulness practice taught at IMS accessible to the world.[22]

The American Vipassanā teachers seem not to acknowledge other sources of ideas and practices, either. Of the many 'Dharma books' being offered for sale today, very few allow the reader to check the source by giving complete citations for Pāḷi texts or other spiritual teachings. Instead, the very loose paraphrases frequently offered are attributed to 'the Buddha', or 'Buddhism'; for some of these, one would be hard pressed to find any direct correlation in the texts or traditions they are presumably drawn from. In terms of actual content and framework, then, many American presentations have much more to do with understandings from the authors' own practice and philosophical background than with the teachings of the Buddha or any particular tradition descended from him. American culture strongly values heroic individualism, a do-it-yourself attitude often tending towards arrogance. Perhaps this is why we Americans frequently overlook or dismiss the value of wisdom passed down from elders or ancient traditions. As a source of

22 My digital collation of word frequencies from the *Insight* magazine (Fall 1996 – Spring 2002) revealed that while there were 484 occurrences of the term 'experience', the Mahāsi Sayadaw was acknowledged only eight times; the Dalai Lama garnered nine mentions, and Sigmund Freud seven. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's talks frequently feature grateful acknowledgements of his teacher; at U Paṇḍita's meditation centers, new arrivals listen to an original recording of meditation instructions by the Mahāsi Sayadaw, who is referred to in public speeches as 'Our Benefactor'.

guidance, this American movement has come down decidedly on the side of personal experience, generally to the exclusion of the Pāḷi literature, where the Mahāsi Sayadaw and his senior students tried to find a balance between the two. One of Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's favorite maxims is characteristically to the point: "theory that does not lack practice; practice that does not lack theory."[23]

While American Vipassanā groups are based and centered on mindfulness practice, the Burmese Theravāda has long been dominated by Pāḷi scholarship for the sake of intellectual repute, similar in some ways to modern academia. In fact, the debate over the relative merits of theoretical study and concentrated practice of the Buddha's teachings is a very ancient one, as evidenced by one sentiment from the *Dhammapada*.

> If he recites many teachings, but
> – heedless man –
> doesn't do what they say,
> like a cowherd counting the cattle of
> others,
> he has no share in the contemplative life.
>
> If he recites next to nothing
> but follows the Dhamma
> in line with the Dhamma;
> abandoning passion,
> version, delusion;
> alert,
> his mind well-released,
> not clinging
> either here or hereafter:
> he has his share in the contemplative life.[24]

Since at least the first century C.E., as noted above, the Theravāda has emphasized scholarship over meditation practice.[25] I have suggested that radical movements towards

23 "ပရိယတ် မကင်းတဲ့ ပဋိပတ် ၊ ပရိယတ် မကင်းတဲ့ ပဋိပတ်"

24 Dhp.I:19-20{Dhp.,3}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

25 According to various chronicles, certain monks over the past millennium did practice and propagate mindfulness practice; Shin Arahan, for example,

cultivation of 'direct knowing' tend to gain strength in historical moments of rapid cultural change, such as that of the Buddha and that of the Mahāsi Sayadaw. Especially in rural areas, the culture of the Burmans, which dominates modern 'Myanmar', has remained quite homogenous and static even with the massive cultural impingement of British imperialism; the nation still ranks among the most isolated in the world. It should not be surprising, then, that more rigidly institutionalized elements of the Theravāda remain strong, and that modern proponents of *satipaṭṭhāna* have met with considerable resistance from more conservative quarters. In response, the Mahāsi Sayadaw points out that the very texts studied by Theravādin scholars list right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration as the final factors of the practice.

> In these days there have cropped up misstatements running counter to what Buddha actually taught. Knowledge, it is said, is accomplishment; and there is no need for anybody to practice *dhamma* once knowledge has been attained. Such a statement virtually amounts to the rejection of the practice of the *dhamma* to the exclusion of the Noble Eightfold Path.[26]

Meditation practice has in fact become quite popular in the modern intellectual environment because of interest in the 'experience of insight'. The Mahāsi Sayadaw did put a great deal of emphasis on this aspect, but his movement came in response to a Burmese Theravādin establishment invested almost exclusively in scholarship of the Pāḷi texts. Just the opposite is true of most native-born American 'Buddhists', with their distrust of authority and emphasis on individual self-discovery. I wonder if a return to the source in this new context might not

---

reportedly taught *satipaṭṭhāna* to king Anawratha of Pagan, Burma.

26 Mahāsi 1980: 10-11. Likewise Collins 1990b: 13, "there is a difference between the way the denial of self is appropriated by the monk earnestly engaged in meditative reflection (which characterizes the most practical form of treading the Buddhist Path), and the way it was appropriated, and elaborated, by the Buddhist scholastic, concerned with preserving and clarifying the conceptual content of Buddhist theory, but not necessarily with *himself* using it to attain *nirvāṇa*." Emphasis in original.

bring those interested in ending suffering towards a balance between meditation and study of the Pāḷi texts, similar to the one the Mahāsi Sayadaw pioneered from the opposite direction.

World-Views

In one discussion with the Kyun-Ma-Nge Sayadaw, a senior teaching disciple of Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's, I reported that I was especially interested in helping the American *Sāsana* develop strength in the area of Dhamma study. The Sayadaw offered me a bit of wise advice: "Just show how *diṭṭhi* are a burden." What did he mean? Some difficulties complicate the translation of *diṭṭhi* here. The term is derived from a root meaning 'sight'; it is used in the Pāḷi in the metaphorical sense of a 'way of seeing', a 'perspective'; the English word 'view' is the most common translation. In this sense, perhaps the Sayadaw was telling me to help Americans see how holding on to and defending any particular view is stressful and agitating.

In the Pāḷi and in Burmese, however, the word *diṭṭhi* is a common shorthand for *micchadiṭṭhi*, wrong view, the kind of misconceptions and misunderstandings that get us hurt. During certain points in intensive mindfulness practice, the experiences of seeing, hearing, touching, thinking and so on are seen as vibrating and flickering extremely rapidly, not staying still for an instant. On that level, pleasant and painful experiences all seem to be rushing past, gone as soon as they are known, futile to hold on to. We see more and more clearly how foolish and stressful it is to invest our hopes for happiness in any experience. Seeing sensation rushing past like that can be rather nauseating at certain points, but abandoning the search for pleasure is a tremendous relief, a singular joy.

On the Theravādin path, theoretical understanding and practical application inform and deepen one another. The value

placed on realizing the cessation of experience, *nibbāna*, rests on an understanding that the very process of existence involves stress, anguish, suffering: *dukkha*. This idea has sometimes been seen as pessimistic when contrasted with the Greco-Judaic tradition. Regardless of whether God said it was 'good', though, I suspect that ancient Hebrews as well as ancient Indians have found suffering in some aspects of death, illness, separation from loved ones, and so on. When Sylvia Boorstein writes of her grandmother's guidance on suffering, one can hear Yiddish accented echoes of the 'the good book'.

> ...she was philosophical about my moods. Sadness didn't worry her. On those occasions when I said, "But I'm not happy!" she would say, "Where is it written that you are supposed to happy all the time?"
>
> I don't remember this comment as a rebuke. I think of it now as my introduction to the first of the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha. Life is difficult because things change. Change means loss and disappointment. Bodies and relationships are, from time to time, painful. I was reassured by my grandmother's response. I didn't feel I was making a mistake by feeling sad, and she didn't feel obliged to fix me.[27]

Once birth occurs, death is unavoidable. Pleasure and pain are part of the same package. Liberation from suffering, according to the Theravāda, is achieved not by maintaining constant pleasure, but rather through bringing an accepting engagement – mindfulness – to the whole range of life's joys and sorrows, just as they are. If *dukkha* is evident in the impermanence of life, of health, and of relationships, the Buddha's discourses in the Pāḷi merely extend this principle to the rapidly changing nature of all experience.

The more we realize the oppressive nature of any experience – through careful and continuous observation – the less we find ourselves trying to arrange everything so that it will be pleasant.

27 Boorstein 1999b: 97-8. Note the fundamentally logocentric – and more specifically, scriptural – approach of the Greco-Judaic tradition here: 'where is it written...?'.

We begin to relax. As the agitation and frustration that come from trying to squeeze happiness out of experience begins to ebb slightly, there can be an enormous flood of energy, as if a great weight has been lifted. I think that is what the Sayadaw meant when he said that "*diṭṭhi* are a burden": misunderstandings such as our basic belief that experience has something substantial to it – that we can really control it, and that it can really bring us happiness – lead us into massive amounts of suffering.

> One understands wrong view as wrong view and right view as right view: this is one's right view... One makes an effort to abandon wrong view and to enter upon right view: this is one's right effort. Mindfully one abandons wrong view, mindfully one enters upon and abides in right view: this is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three states run and circle around right view, that is, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.[28]

The skillfulness of one's understandings determines whether one progresses towards or away from the liberation from views, according to the Pāḷi. This is why the discourses show the Buddha encouraging a beneficial kind of understanding: *sammā·diṭṭhi*, views that are 'just right' for achieving the cessation of suffering.[29]

> And what, bhikkhus, is right view? Right view, I say, is twofold: there is right view is affected by the taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions [of further existence]; and there is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path...[30]

---

28 Mahācattārīsaka Sutta (M.117){III,71ff}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. My interpretation of Kyun-Man-Nge Sayadaw's point is supported by the commentary (MA.117){IV,131}, "this is the right view of insight which understands wrong view as an object by penetrating its characteristics of impermanence, etc., and which understands right view by exercising the function of comprehension and clearing away confusion," as paraphrased by Bodhi in the endnotes (p1327).

29 Please see the discussion on p.118.

30 Mahācattārīsaka Sutta (M.117){III,72}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Thanissaro Bhikkhu renders *āsava* as "fermentations," where Ñāṇamoli gives "taints," a more standard translation but one which might miss connotations of the original such as 'intoxicants', and 'discharge

The type of wisdom that is supramundane, *lokuttara* (literally 'above the world'), comes only when one has fully accomplished insight into the nature of worldly experience. The realization of *nibbāna* goes beyond everything in *saṃsāra*, including the teachings themselves. Nonetheless, abandoning views entirely is not easy: most of us need guidance to ease our way out. I have found teachings from the Buddha – as mediated through my teachers and through texts – indispensable in developing the faculty of wisdom. In order to undertake the practice long enough to taste its fruit, I needed at least the willingness to accept that applying continuous awareness to my sense experience might be beneficial. Such is the value of mundane right view.

The Theravāda includes under this type of right view the understanding that wholesome and unwholesome actions have corresponding results, that this stream of cause and effect continues across lifetimes, and that there are those who have directly realized these truths for themselves.[31] Some of these ideas may be readily acceptable to people raised with a modern Western worldview. Other aspects of this teaching will appear at first to contradict the Western Scientific tradition. If we wish to be truly critical thinkers, though, we must be prepared to question the assumptions of our own tradition, as well as others. Foreign world-views may have the most to offer us precisely in the places that they most challenge us.

---

from a sore'. See Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "āsava," 114-5. On the other hand, Ñāṇamoli's "supramundane" better captures the composition, and perhaps the connotations, of *lokuttarā*, which literally means 'above the world'.

31 M.117{III,72}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, "And what, bhikkhus, is right view that is affected by the taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions? 'There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed; there is fruit and result of good and bad actions; there is this world and the other world; there is mother and father; there are beings who are reborn spontaneously; there are in the world good and virtuous recluses and brahmins who have realised for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.'" Cf. DA.2{I,165}.

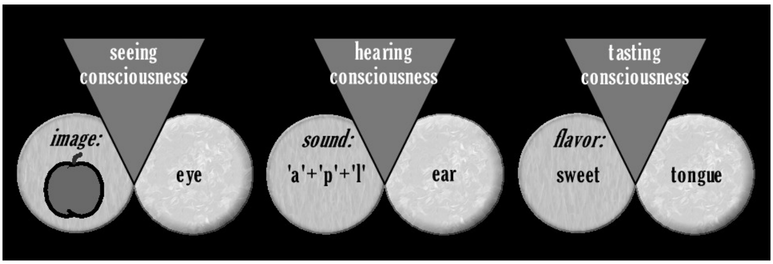
Every way of thinking starts from some set of values determining what to examine and how to go about it. The modern disciplines of Biology, Chemistry, and Physics are no exception: they prioritize physical aspects of reality and a rational way of analyzing these. The tenets of Western Science are justified within their own system, but not necessarily outside of it: if we use instruments and methods that detect only physical aspects of reality, for instance, the results cannot disprove or prove or otherwise say much about the existence of mental phenomena. There are other approaches to understanding reality that make sense within their own respective value-frameworks, without negating the effectiveness of the Western Scientific approach at fulfilling its own goals. Before we dismiss the Buddha's teachings on right view as incompatible with modern thought, we would do well to compare the assumptions implicit in the Western worldview, which – although increasingly dominant among human societies all over planet Earth – is nonetheless mainly descended from the ideas of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks.

Western Science and the Theravāda complement one another in many areas. The most fundament difference between these two approaches lies in their choice of data to focus on. Most biologists would find little to object to in the Pāḷi texts' description of sense experience as an emergent property of contact between sense object and a sense base: seeing consciousness, for instance, is said to result from the meeting of visual stimuli with the eye. Yet the Buddha's emphasis on direct sense experience is radical today, as it was in his own time and place. In the Pāḷi, the Buddha focuses on the cessation of suffering in the 'world', *loka*.[32] However, he means something rather different from the Hebrew idea of overcoming evil in society, or the kindred modern ideal of peace on Earth. Ānanda, the Buddha's devoted attendant, interprets 'world' in the

32 E.g. Rohitassa Sutta (S.II.26){I,62}.

Buddha's discourse to mean *lokasaññī*, "our experience of the world," as Nathan Katz renders the Pāḷi term, "in the sense that one need not grant any world apart from our experience."[33] Rarely are this teaching's implications fully understood.

> What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, [*bhikkave*], is called the All. Anyone who would say, 'Repudiating this All, I will describe another,' if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.[34]



Three Instances of the All[35]

This "Discourse on the All" challenges us to recognize that our sense experience is a step removed from the outer world, because there is no sensation of 'I' or 'you', 'apple' or 'Theravāda'. One can see a red shape, hear the sound of the word 'apple', or have a thought about a certain type of fruit; one can taste sweetness on the tongue, too. In the realm of sense experience, however, the apple is nowhere to be found. Such a conceptual entity is actually an abstraction from various instances of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. Our belief in the reality of a world of people and physical objects derives from

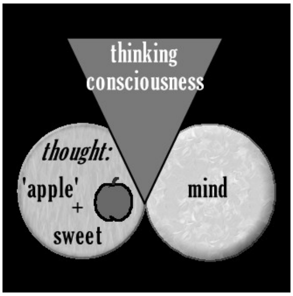
---

33 Katz 1989: 147-8, refers to the Buddha's claim at S.II.26{I,62}and Ānanda's rendering at S.XXXV.116{IV,95}. See also Bhikkhu Bodhi's interpretation of *lokasaññī*, in the notes to his translation of the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, p393-4.

34 Sabba Sutta (S.XXXV.23){IV,15}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

35 For the basic model on which this and following diagrams elaborate, I am indebted to Andrew Olendzki, Buddist Psychology Course, December 2001, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

the apparent coherence of sense experience: it makes sense that there really are apples, because we find similar patterns of seeing and tasting and so on occurring together again and again. The reality of tasting itself does not need any such deduction. Some have made the analogy here to the way the characters and plot of a movie differ from the physical process of light hitting a theater screen.[36] Each have a reality, to be sure, but they are qualitatively different.



Concepts such as 'apple' or 'Theravāda' refer to no particular sense experience. The referent of 'apple' may very well exist, but it cannot be directly known; it "lies beyond range."[37] Thus 'apple' has reality in our world of experience only as a (mostly implicit) agreement among people to associate certain other sense experiences with the thought 'apple' and the sound of the word. This type of reality, of apples and of people, is 'conventional' (*sammuti*). Tasting, on the other hand, belongs to 'ultimate' reality (*paramatthā*), "which simply means objects that can be experienced directly without the meditation of concepts," as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita defines it.[38] This is the understanding of 'two truths' formulated explicitly by the Theravādin commentators but implicit throughout the Buddha's discourses in the Pāḷi.[39]

---

36 E.g. Goldstein 1993c: 111.

37 Sabba Sutta (S.XXXV.23), trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

38 Paṇḍita 1993: 105.

39 Warder 2000: 146-7, concludes in his comprehensive comparison of various textual traditions that "the *Tripiṭaka* itself in the earliest form which we can now restore it explicitly recognizes that there are two levels of statement." He cites D.33{III,227}, which describes four types of 'knowledge': "*dhamme ñāṇa*... refers to knowledge of things or events that are directly experienced... Second is *anvaye ñāṇa* or inductive knowledge. This latter is based on, and not independent of, knowledge by experience," according to Kalupahana 1979: 78. Following Kalupahana, I would group the other two listed at D.33, *pariye ñāṇa* (knowledge of others) and *sammutiyā ñāṇa*

From the perspective of the "Discourse on the All," ordaining as a nun or monk in order to focus on meditation is hardly a retreat from the world; on the contrary, such renunication would enable greater attention to the world that is most real: the process of sensation. As the Buddha of the Pāḷi texts would have it, 'All' we can directly know, the only place we can directly cure suffering, is our own 'world of experience'. Among traditions of

---

(knowledge that is conventional, generally consented to or used), under the category of indirect knowledge. Warder tentatively categorizes all except *sammutiyā ñāṇa* as direct.

In any case, as Warder points out, the Buddha throughout the texts speaks of beings living and dying and being reborn, as well as "a sequence of conditions with no permanent entity among them, of desire existing through a condition but no one who 'desires'. It is this latter type of statement which is directly connected to his exposition of the 'truths', and which moreover he himself regarded as a matter 'difficult to see'. Unless we attribute to him or to the compilers of the *Tripiṭaka* an incredible ineptitude, entirely at variance with the subtlety and precision of most of the discourses ascribed to him, we must follow this interpretation according to two levels of statement..." Thus at A.II.25{I,60}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Monks, these two slander the Tathagata. Which two? He who explains a discourse whose meaning needs to be inferred [*neyyattha*] as one whose meaning has already been fully drawn out [*nītattha*]. And he who explains a discourse whose meaning has already been fully drawn out as one whose meaning needs to be inferred."

From this understanding of 'two truths', the classical Theravādin commentators, such as Buddhaghosa, developed the idea of *paramattha*, 'ultimate reality', made of elements each with an essential nature (*sabhāva*). Nāgārjuna's critique was likely aimed at such absolutist interpretations. Even within the Theravāda, modern monks such as Ñāṇananda 1997: 45, have cited texts such as the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (D.9){I,202}, where the Buddha speaks of concepts as "merely worldly conventions in common use, which he made use of without clinging to them." Ñāṇananda "wonders whether this simple though profound attitude of the Buddha towards concepts has been properly handed down in tradition." As he writes on the previous page, "One might distinguish between the relatively true and the relatively false in theory, between the precise and the vague in terminology, between the scholastic and the wayward in phraseology, but one has to remember that as concepts they are all one. Nor should on seriously regard some concepts as absolute and inviolable categories in preference to others, and pack them in water-tight cartons labeled '*paramattha*'." Ñāṇanda's is a cogent and crucial return to the

thought in India, the worldview presented in the Pāḷi resonates much more closely with the great Bronze Age civilization that thrived in the Indus valley from around 3000 B.C.E. than with the Āryan religious systems that later came to dominate.

One famous seal from the Indus civilization bears an image of an ascetic in cross-legged meditation posture. For this and other reasons, the renunciate movement around 500 B.C.E., of which the Buddha was a part, is often seen as drawing inspiration from this early period of Indian thought. The Indo-European Āryan culture which followed "was more mundane in its outlook, as is evident from some hymns extolling the *soma*-drinking, fun-loving gods." Indeed, certain texts chronicle the Āryans' awe at the "naked, long-haired ascetics" of the Indus culture they replaced.[40]

> Although the ascetic tradition of the non-Aryans was in time relegated to the background as a result of the dominance of the more mundane Aryan tradition, it could not be completely wiped out. After remaining dormant for a while, it seems to have re-emerged with fresh vigor and vitality. The history of Indian philosophy may be described as the story of the struggle for supremacy between these two traditions.[41]

Nomadic Āryan herdsmen enter the archeological record of north India around 1700 B.C.E. The Indo-European society of the Āryans was focused on the content of experience: knowledge and action in the outer world of people and physical objects. By the thirteenth century a line of Āryan kings managed to consolidate power over the diverse indigenous cultural groups of northern India, establishing the Paurava Empire, which would reach its apex around the ninth century B.C.E. While the political leaders of this empire were of Āryan extraction, and the ancient Āryan

---

understanding of the Pāḷi. By the same token, however, we can recognize the direct reality of the referent of 'hearing' without clinging to specific linguistic expressions of it. The radical challenge and the philosophical coherence of the teachings given by the Buddha in these discourses depend on the message of the "Sabba Sutta": that the process of sensation is all we can directly know, that conventional entities lie 'beyond range'.

40 Kalupahana 1976: 3-4, cites the *Keśī-sūkta* of the *Ṛgveda.*

41 Kalupahana 1976: 3-4.

hymns of the *Vedās* continued to be used, "there was a gradual synthesis of the Aryan and the more originally Indian traditions."[42] This cultural melting pot was one reason that there was such a diversity of competing spiritual, philosophical, and religious teachings in north India of the last millennium B.C.E. The Buddha's teachings were one product of these times.[43]

A large renunciate movement, made up of many different teachers and small groups of followers, developed in India around 500 B.C.E. Though their philosophies were very diverse, some ideals were common among them: in particular, renunciation of sexual and economic activity in order to practice for the sake of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. These values bore much less similarity to the Āryan tradition than to earlier indigenous Indian societies, which were more closely tied to the earth and natural rhythms. This outlook led to a cyclical understanding of life and death, according to one Italian scholar, Julius Evola.[44]

Warder sees the pre-Āryan philosophical framework, with its orientation towards natural cycles, reemerging at the time of the

---

42 Warder 2000: 17-21.

43 As the Āryan monarchies expanded south, they encountered small bands of hunter-gatherers and tribes governed by councils of aristocrats in a type of democracy. It was into one of these later tribes, the Sakya, that Siddhattha Gotama is said to have been born. If so, the future Buddha would not necessarily have had extensive exposure to the Vedic ideals of neighboring Indo-Āryan civilizations until later in life. Schmidt 1995: 118, points out that "the *kshatriyas* [warrior class] and the republics were in many ways the ones who lost the most during the transition from less complex lineage-based governments and societies to more complex state-based systems. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the founder of Jainism, Mahavira (c. 540-469 BCE), and the Buddha (c. 563-483 BCE), were both kshatriyas and both founded their respective systems of thought not in monarchies, but in republics, where Brahamanical supremacy had not taken hold." I am indebted to Kermit Blackwoods for the initial suggestion that led to this investigation.

44 Evola 1996: 26. Evola contrasts the views of the early Indian societies with the Āryan philosophical framework here in order to buttress his claim that Buddha's teachings might not originally have included the doctrine of reincarnation. However, this reasoning is based on Evola's assumption that the Buddha was operating in a basically Indo-European philosophical context. Recent studies suggest that this is not a valid assumption.

renunciate movement in Indian texts such as the *puraṇas*, the histories. He points in particular to the doctrine of reincarnation, “which is barely mentioned in the latest part of the *Veda* but practically taken for granted in the non-Vedic Brahmanical tradition.” Western traditional and modern ideas of a single lifetime (followed by eternal life or by annihilation) mirror the originally Hebrew idea of history having a definite beginning ('the Word' or 'the big bang') and end ('the kingdom of God' or 'peace on earth'). Likewise, Warder associates the Indian understanding of continuity across lifetimes with the vast scale of time employed in the *puraṇas*, which detail many evolutions and devolutions of the universe. Some principles of this pre-Āryan world-view seem to be emerging from recent discoveries of Western Science, as well.

> Very important, it would seem, for all religious and philosophical ideas in India is the vastness of the time scale assumed, which in fact agrees well with that established for the universe by modern astronomy and contrasts most strongly with the traditions of Western religions... The Indian ideas of time were in fact quite early related to astronomical observations...[45]

The various renunciate communities, including that of the Buddha, did apparently use and adapt many Āryan words and ideas to describe the views and practices they advocated. Nonetheless, in the Pāḷi discourses the Buddha consistently rejects the idea of a permanent hellish or heavenly destination after death, even for those fully awakened.[46] The Buddha’s presentation adds the prospect of liberation to the round of *saṃsāra*, but is nonetheless dependent on and consistent with the ‘naturalistic’ idea of rebirth. Thus it seems likely that the Buddha’s teachings framed some Indo-European Āryan terminology and conceptions of spiritual practice in a world-view that recognized the cycle of life as continuous, rather than

45 Warder 2000: 22-3.

46 The question of what happens to a fully awakened being on death is one of those which the Buddha says “doesn’t apply,” e.g. at M.72.

inserting the idea of rebirth into an Indo-European framework. This historical evidence supports the overwhelming impression given by the Pāḷi texts that the Buddha saw reincarnation as a fundamental characteristic of existence.

The Pāḷi discourses and the Abhidhamma literature offer a perspective on existence quite different from any in the Greco-Judaic tradition. The Theravādin analysis of experience proves more explanatory and less problematic in certain ways than those offered to date by Western philosophy and psychology. Nonetheless, when particular ideas such as 'rebirth' are removed from their native philosophical context, they make little sense in terms of modern scientific materialism. The problem here is neither the Pāḷi texts' concept of rebirth nor the biological understanding of death. Rather, both make eminent sense given the assumptions and emphases of their respective traditions. My suggestion is that even a minimal understanding of the Theravādin worldview will render many aspects of the Buddha's teachings, such as continuity of cause and effect over lifetimes, quite sensible and even attractive to modern Americans.

Action And Reaction

Fundamental to the teachings of the Buddha in the Pāḷi is the idea that volitional actions have results, that skillful or unskillful actions have both immediate and long-term consequences. The Pāḷi text *Milindapañha* relates a discussion between the Greek king Menander and the Venerable Nāgasena, centered on *kamma* and rebirth. Nāgasena presents the understanding of dependent co-arising as a middle way which transcends two problematic views: the essentialist doctrine that there is an eternal, unchanging self, and the nihilist doctrine that there is no continuity, so that there could be no consequences for unskillful actions. The potential created by a moment of skillful or unskillful action is planted like

a seed in the mind-body process and passed along until the necessary conditions are present for it to give fruit. The particular results, happy or unhappy, depend on the type of seed planted.

> "But is it possible, Venerable Sir, to show 'that kamma is stored here and here'?"...
>
> "Consider a a certain tree's as yet unborn fruit, great king; is it possible to show 'that fruit is stored here and here'?"
>
> "No indeed... Clever you are, Venerable Nāgasena."[47]

I have also found the analogy of pool balls useful to understand how the force of *kamma* might be passed along a stream of consciousness. If a cue ball is given a certain spin, when it hits the number three ball, say, even though nothing substantial passes between them, the spin is passed along. When the three hits the fourteen, the potential energy of that spin is passed along again, and on down the line, until the spin energy is realized in a ball veering to one side or the other. Similarly, there is no place that a record of actions is stored between moments of consciousness. Rather, the potential energy created by an action is passed along from moment to moment until the conditions are present for that energy to be realized in the form of a specific result. *Kamma* is a good deal more complex than spin on pool balls, of course; in one discourse the Buddha warns that trying to understand the precise workings of all our actions and reactions would drive a person mad.[48]

Though the Theravādin tradition has often ascribed specific results to specific actions in past lives, certain Pāḷi discourses would warn against taking such correlations absolutely. In one passage, the Buddha grants that some practitioners may develop enough concentration of mind to see where beings are reborn, but he rejects the various absolutist views that people form based on their own limited perception of action and its effects.[49] The

---

47 Miln.V.8{72}, author's trans.

48 Acinteyya Sutta (A.IV.77){II,80}.

49 Maha-Kammavibhaṅga Sutta (M.136){III,213}.

causal process of action and reaction is not purely linear. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu describes it, dependent co-arising involves multiple feedback loops.

> Thus every event takes place in a context determined by the combined effects of past events coming from a wide range in time, together with the effects of present acts. These effects can intensify one another, can coexist with little interaction, or can cancel one another out. Thus, even though it is possible to predict that a certain type of act will tend to give a certain type of result – for example, acting on anger will lead to pain – there is no way to predict when or where that result will make itself felt.[50]

The particular properties associated with a moment of sensation would increase the potential for certain developments to occur in the same way that particular genetic potentialities are

50 Thanissaro 1996: Introduction. Thanissaro points to the "the flow of give and take among the factors of the process" illustrated at [S.XII.69{II,118}] with the image of lakes overflowing and spilling into the sea, the sea rising and ultimately affecting the lake. "A more modern pattern that might be used to illustrate dependent co-arising is the 'strange attractor': an intricate, interwoven pattern that chaos theory uses to describe complex, fluid systems containing at least three feedback loops," Part III, H, iii.

An understanding of dependent co-arising as the interaction of linear and synchronic principles makes disentanglement from this process logically possible. If events were unaffected by their present context, and one simply conditioned the next event in time, the outcome would be entirely determined by the original conditions; there would be no use in practice and learning. If there were no causal continuity between past and future, and an event were influenced only by present conditions, the process would be totally arbitrary; no action could have any effect on future results.

Mental and physical processes set in motion by previous wholesome and unwholesome actions potentially effect any present situation, but the ability of particular seeds to ripen in the present is determined by the presence or absence of certain conditions, such as delusion. It is in the allowance for the input of effort and insight in the present that Thanissaro sees "some room for free will," (Intro.). "In cases where the link between *x* and *y* is necessary but not sufficient, then in terms of this/that conditionality, the *x* factor is input from the past – even if only a split-second past – whereas ignorance is the input from the present needed to give rise to *y*. Thus the strategy of the practice must be to use appropriate attention to eliminate ignorance in the presence of *x*," Part III, H, iii.

passed along between generation after generation of trees and fruit. Say we feel a mosquito bite, and anger arises. Often, we do not even notice the fact that there is anger; we just react out of aversion. Swat. Unwholesome actions can only arise when this factor of delusion is present. In order to survive, people must constantly weigh the costs and benefits of various actions; the more fully we understand the consequences of a particular decision, the more skillfully we can navigate away from suffering. Every time we intentionally take life, that strengthens killing as a habit, a knee-jerk reaction that will occur when we are surprised or when we are not paying attention. This is how habits of mind are passed along the stream of consciousness. When we kill out of aversion, this immediately distances us from the qualities of compassion and equanimity that allow the heart to open. Habits that are cultivated through repetition come to define our personality and determine our degree of peace of mind.

Wholesome qualities can also be cultivated. Bringing mindfulness to bear on anger can transform the situation, for instance. One might become interested in the intricate, fluctuating texture of the physical pain from the mosquito bite. Alternatively, the attention might take the fleeting nature of anger itself as the object. Either way, wisdom and equanimity are cultivated in the present and strengthened so that they will arise more readily in the future. A moment of mindfulness plants many beneficial seeds in one's stream of consciousness.

> The first kind of right view is *kammassakatā sammā·diṭṭhi*, right view of kamma as one's property... Kamma is our only reliable possession in this world. We must understand that whatever good and evil we do will follow us through saṃsāra, giving rise to corresponding good or evil consequences...
>
> Seeing life in this way gives us the power to choose the conditions under which we want to live... Since we, like all beings, want happiness, this understanding of kamma will generate in us a strong wish to develop more and more

> wholesome habits. We will also want to avoid acting in ways that will bring us future misery.[51]

Sayadaw U Paṇḍita stresses that our wholesome and unwholesome actions have long-term as well as immediate consequences. Generous works that are done towards the end of our life, for instance, have just as much potential to bring happiness as those carried out in our childhood, because the results of our actions follow us past death.

One dear friend and fellow American practitioner told me that he could not accept the idea that any soul or self-essence of 'Alan' would be reborn in a new body. I pointed out that his was not a rejection of reincarnation as presented by the Theravāda, but rather a deep understanding of nonself. The Buddha's discourses in the Pāḷi consistently reject the idea of any aspect of being that lasts even between successive moments of experience. They nonetheless allow for causal connections along a stream consciousness, within as well as between lifetimes.

Even among Westerners who have dedicated themselves to the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* or the study of the Pāḷi texts, there is a strong (and usually unconscious) bias towards explaining reality primarily in physical terms. Without an understanding of mental aspects of reality as significant causal agents, the idea of any connection between instances of life not related by genes or physical environment is indeed problematic. Many modern people, even prominent teachers of 'Buddhism' such as Stephen Batchelor, do not see

> how one can possibly square rebirth with what we currently understand about the evolution of the human organism and the nature of the brain... Not so much because I can disprove it, but because it goes against what I understand of the natural sciences. But... the current scientific paradigm could shift in ways we cannot foresee. One has to keep an open mind.[52]

---

51 Paṇḍita 1993: 243.

52 Batchelor 2002: 57, continues, "There seems to be no room for a disembodied ghostly consciousness that inhabits the body-brain, and then, when the body-brain dies, persists as an immaterial entity that goes on to

We do not have to wait for the current scientific paradigm to shift unless Western Science has some monopoly on truth. The disciplines of Physics, Chemistry, and Biology are limited by their approach and their instruments to examining physical aspects of existence. The Theravāda offers an approach to understanding the interplay of mental and physical factors that has proven logically justifiable and effective at aiding mindfulness practitioners for thousands of years. In philosophy, as in photography, different projects call for different methods. Black and white film is brilliant at capturing the play of shadows and for many other uses, but it is not an effective tool for capturing the signals at a stoplight, because it does not register a crucial variable. Likewise, the experimental results and explanatory theories of modern Science are tremendously powerful when applied to physical aspects of reality, but attempts to provide complete accounts of conscious experience are outside of their domain.

Recall that from the perspective of the Buddha's teachings in the Pāḷi, the 'All' is composed entirely of *phassa*, contact between sense base and sense object. We can only directly know phenomena within this 'world of experience', so from the Theravādin perspective, we cannot know whether there really exists a 'brain' or a 'body' apart from moments of intellectual consciousness, of seeing (the image of a brain), and so on. The discourses of the Pāḷi describe an individual's world of experience as composed of various mental and physical factors, *nāma* and *rūpa*. These two are not the separate, independent worlds that René Descartes envisioned.

> ...the Buddha spoke of the human person as a psychophysical personality (*nāmarūpa*). Yet the psychic and the physical were never discussed in isolation, nor were they viewed as self-subsistent entities. For him, there was neither a 'material-stuff'

another birth. I simply cannot buy that view." The Buddha did not believe in the entity of a self, either, just a stream of experience.

> nor a 'mental-stuff', because both are results of reductive analyses that go beyond experience.[53]

The physical and mental aspects of human experience are continually arising together, intimately dependent on one another. This is why Sayadaw U Paṇḍita often recounts the many health benefits of mindfulness, even presenting *satipaṭṭhāna* as a cure for cancer in certain cases. In its approach to such diseases, the modern medical establishment seems to be moving towards the Theravādin understanding of the mind and body as interdependent aspects of an organic whole.

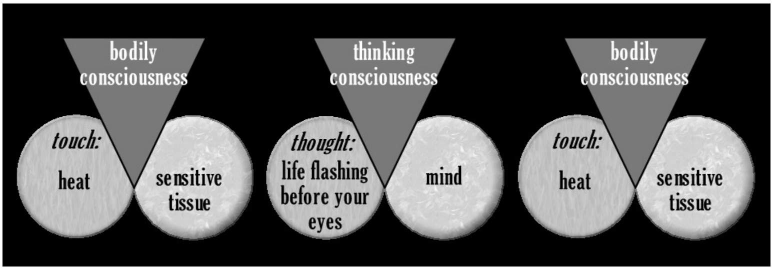
Part of the reason that modern medicine has been slow to appreciate the intimate ties between mental states and physical health is that Western Science in general has focused on one half of Descartes' view of reality, namely physical matter. Some modern people have disregarded the significance of mental phenomena because they lie beyond the range of physical instruments and of the supposedly objective third person perspective. We can take a more balanced approach by recognizing the explanatory power of the physical sciences within their domain, and also allowing for the validity of other ways of knowing within the particular domains they focus on.

Technological advances may eventually enable physical instruments to read the content of thoughts by analyzing patterns of neurons firing off electric impulses. Nonetheless, the question remains: what is the most direct standpoint from which to understand suffering and the end of suffering? One might be able to infer the hue of a flower from a chemical analysis of pigment molecules in the petal, but just opening one's eyes gives a much fuller and more direct understanding of the color. Likewise, I would suggest, the clearest and most healing way to understand the cycle of suffering is from the perspective of

53 Kalupahana 1976: 73, refers to D.15{II,62}, where the Buddha speaks of both physicality and mentality mutually dependent forms of contact (*phassa*). Physicality is described as contact with resistance (*paṭighasamphassa*), mentality as contact with concepts (*adhivacanasamphassa*).

sensation, which is the domain of the Theravādin analysis and of *satipaṭṭhāna*.

When concentration and mindfulness are strong, the arising and passing of each successive sensation become apparent. In a sense, rebirth happens every instant. The instant of death would be similar to any other in that various psycho-physical phenomena would arise together and create certain conditions that influence how the stream of consciousness would flow on. Many people who have undergone near-death experiences describe the phenonmenon of having one's life 'flash before one's eyes'. According to the Theravādin analysis, something along these lines happens at the moment of death. Recalling one's actions – one's *kamma* – in the last moments of life, there is a certain degree of joy or of regret. The emotional reaction to this 'image of one's actions' (*kamma-nimitta*) plays a large role in determining what type of experience arises in following moments, from hellish to sublime. Particular physical sensations that arise in the first moment of consciousness or in succeeding moments of a given lifetime might later be interpreted as a 'body', but given the psychological development of the embryo, he or she probably would not have such a concept at this point. This is just to say that rebirth is logically possible from a rigorously phenomenological perspective.



Neither the Theravādin analysis nor observations from mindfulness meditation can provide sufficient evidence to prove that the process of cause and result in a stream of consciousness does continue past the death of a particular body. Proving that is

not the goal of the Pāḷi, anyway. Liberation from suffering is the goal. If the Buddha thought that greed, hatred, and delusion would cease entirely when a person's body dies, he would have encouraged people to take the quickest route there. Implicit in every Pāḷi discourse teaching generosity, moral conduct, or mental development is the understanding that such wholesome actions bring about more freedom from suffering than would simply committing suicide. I suspect that most Americans instinctually understand this to be true, even if they have not fully worked out the logical implications.

According to Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, the primary importance of the rebirth doctrine is its power to encourage skillful action and discourage unskillful action. He stresses that the results of volitional action in a stream of consciousness continue to produce results past the point of death; as long as delusion is not dispelled, the cycle will continue. The majority of Americans do have a practical understanding of this principle; though they may reject ideas of heaven, hell, or rebirth, most try not to harm others or themselves, even on their deathbeds, when there would be no social repercussions for them personally.

Though many of the senior American meditation teachers do find the idea of continuity between lifetimes to be quite sensible, they nonetheless attempt to render the teachings accessible to people who might not. In general, they direct attention towards the kind of psychological rebirth that is evident moment to moment within a given lifetime.[54] A curious convention has arisen in response to the skeptical American context. Addressing the effects of skillful actions in the present lifetime and in future ones, for instance, many American teachers use disclaimers such

54 Advocating a traditional reflection on "the preciousness of our human birth," for instance, Goldstein 2002: 25, writes "Whether or not we believe in past or future lives, or in the existence of other realms, we can still practice this reflection that turns our mind towards the Dharma when we consider the circumstances of our present life situation. At this moment, we might have sufficient leisure, resources and interest to explore a path of awakening, but all these conditions are changeable and uncertain."

as 'If you believe in rebirth, skillful actions will have wholesome consequences in future lives...' From the standpoint of dependent co-arising, of course, whether a particular person believes in rebirth or not, their cycle of action and reaction continues as long as attachment, aversion, and delusion are still arising.

Stephen Batchelor takes another approach.

> It may seem that there are two options: either to believe in rebirth or not. But there is a third alternative: to acknowledge, in all honesty, *I do not know*... Dharma practice requires the courage to confront what it means to be human. All the pictures we entertain of heaven and hell or cycles of rebirth serve to replace the unknown with an image of what is already known. To cling to the idea of rebirth can deaden questioning.[55]

The practice does require this kind of courage to bring the 'beginner's mind' to every moment. Nonetheless, practitioners do frame their efforts with the understanding that their lifetime has some continuity, that present actions will bear fruit in the space of days or years. Few would initiate and persevere through difficulty otherwise. A return to the Theravādin "understanding of understanding," the analysis of dependent co-arising, might allow Americans to frame their practice in the larger context of many lifetimes, as the Buddha presents it in the Pāḷi.

The principles and goals of the Eightfold Noble Path might be rendered sensible with the minimum understanding of a single lifetime as a psycho-physical process of cause and effect. Nonetheless, a considered acceptance of the continuous round of existence allows for a deeper and less ambiguous connection with the traditional teachings of Burmese meditation masters and the Pāḷi texts. If we dismiss such wisdom, we are left with a framework that does not necessarily lead us all the way to the final goal of the Buddha's teachings. Bhikkhu Bodhi offers a cogent warning.

> ...to downplay the doctrine of rebirth and explain the entire import of the Dhamma as the amelioration of mental suffering

55 Batchelor 1997: 38.

> through enhanced self-awareness is to deprive the Dhamma of those wider perspectives from which it derives its full breadth and profundity. By doing so one seriously risks reducing it in the end to little more than a sophisticated ancient system of humanistic psychotherapy.[56]

The understanding of multiple lifetimes can be quite a healthy context for practice. Michele McDonald points out that American meditators often try to force their practice forward, where Burmese are more likely to have a relaxed attitude since they understand that their path to *nibbāna* has been progressing over many lifetimes and will progress over as many as it takes. This is the type of understanding that is balanced as well as logically justifiable: *sammādiṭṭhi*, 'right view'.

When a practitioner is facing particular obstacles, certain discourses from the Pāḷi can address the current situation with direct and profound guidance. In a recent interview, one Vipassanā teacher at Spirit Rock in California related how in the early years of his pratice he found the *suttas* "not just dry but worse: irrelevant." As Guy Armstrong's practice deepened, however,

> I found the suttas spoke to my experience more and more directly. But they are not particularly about emotional healing, and that's what I was practicing for in the early years. As my emotions smoothed out a little and some stability came in, I found that my interest in meditation shifted somewhat away from focusing on the content of my experience to being more interested in the *process*: how things were coming and going, how they were being known, and how knowing changed, depending on the balances in the mind of wholesome and unwholesome factors. Once that shift began, then the suttas really started to open up for me.[57]

Even without making any historical claims about the author of these discourses, we can acknowledge where the texts' depth and coherence surpasses the genius of any living individual. John

---

56 Bodhi 1987.

57 Armstrong 2003: 3.

Maraldo suggests that "practice can be seen as a hermeneutical principle that discloses the meaning of certain texts at the same time that the texts tell one how to practice."[58] If so, what is lost when modern practitioners are not enabled and encouraged to dig deeply into the source of the *Dhamma-Vinaya* practice, the Buddha's discourses in the Pāḷi?

> Endowed with six qualities, bhikkhus, one listening to the worthy teachings is capable of entering the way, the rightness of skillful qualities. Which six?
>
> When the Doctrine & Discipline declared by the One-Thus-Gone [the Buddha] is being taught, one listens intently, gives ear, sets one's mind on understanding, sets aside what is not beneficial, grabs hold of what is beneficial, and is filled with satisfaction from being in accordance.[59]

---

58 Armstrong 2003: 27ff.

59 Sussūsati Sutta (A.VI.88){III,437}, author's trans. Though I have followed Thanissaro Bhikkhu closely here, there were a couple of glosses that I felt necessary to adjust. First and foremost, Thanissaro's "is endowed with the patience to conform with the teaching," would be an entirely legitimate translation of *anulomikāya khantiyā samannāgato hoti* if the phrase were taken out of context. One might object to the addition of 'with the teachings', but the English 'conform' is clearer with an object, and Thanissaro is following the commentary faithfully here. However, in the first half of the discourse (which I have not quoted in the text), the Buddha makes the same point in the negative. If we look back to the corresponding phrase in that first half, we find *ananulomikāya... samannāgato hoti*: the negative is on *anuloma*. In order to be consistent with Thanissaro's rendering later in the discourse, we would have to translate 'is endowed with the patience not to conform', which does not make a great deal of sense. No doubt this is why Thanissaro switched the negative over to the *samannāgato*, translating "is not endowed with the patience to conform." This difficulty makes suggests to me some inadequacy of both translations here, positive and negative. Given its derivation from *khamati*, and its definition at Dhs.1341, *khanti* is a slippery word to translate, sliding off into a number of meanings that are more clearly differentiated in English, from 'being accepting of ' (*khamanatā*) and 'being patient with' *(adhivāsanatā)* to 'being satisfied with' and on all the way to 'being pleased with' (*attamanatā*). Perhaps the Buddha is differentiating here between people who gain satisfaction from being contrary and those who gain satisfaction from speaking and acting in accord with others in general, and with the Buddha's teachings in particular (the commentary suggests the latter). Alternatively *khanti* might indicate an acceptance of conformity or contrariness in

oneself. Even so, my translation "is filled with satisfaction from being in accordance" should still not be too far off; it certainly makes rendering the negative half in accordance with the syntax of the original Pāḷi a good deal easier: "is filled with satisfaction from being contrary." On the other hand, perhaps I am just being overly literal here, and taking satisfaction in being contrary.

My second adjustment has perhaps less impact on the overall meaning conveyed. Nonetheless, *sussasati* is what is referred to as a desiderative, that is to say, it is a doubled form of the verb *suṇāti*, expressing the desire or intention to hear. The Aṅgutarra sub-commentary {III,128} makes this clear by giving the definition, "*sotukāmo hoti*," 'has the desire to hear'; I have given 'listens intently'. The first half of the word *sussasati* has only coincidental resemblance to the prefix *su-*, 'well' or 'exceedingly'. Thus, Thanissaro's gloss 'listens well' seems potentially misleading to scholars, even if the final result is not drastically different.

VI

Discussion

the role of a teacher

> The third protection is... *sākacchā·nuggahita*, discussion with a teacher, and it is likened to the many processes involved in cultivating a plant. Plants need different things at different times. Soil may need to be loosed around the roots, but not too much, or the roots will lose their grip on the soil. Leaves must be trimmed, again with care. Overshadowing plants must be cut down. In just this way, when we discuss our practice with a teacher, the teacher will give different instructions depending on what is needed to keep us on the right path.[1]

The last line of Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's explanation illustrates why personal interaction is so vital to successful practice: different guidance is needed at different times. In the Pāḷi, Siddhattha Gotama is said to have awakened on his own, without external guidance; he had trained for countless lifetimes developing the qualities that enabled this accomplishment. For those of us less perfected, a meditation master can make the difference between progressing towards liberation or not. As the Buddha explains in the "Nava Sutta,"

> an attainer-of-knowledge, learned,
> self-developed, unwavering
> can get other people to comprehend --

1 Paṇḍita 1993: 23. The last two lines are somewhat loose renditions of ideas that do appear in the original Burmese talks.

> if they're willing to listen,
> ready to learn.[2]

In the throes of distress or exhilaration, in the face of totally novel experience, it is often very difficult for practitioners to know what course to take. When doubt about one's practice becomes strong, for instance, any decision or resolve made will be second-guessed, and sometimes third- and fourth-guessed, thus rendering the practitioner totally indecisive and unable to concentrate or to progress. While doubt can also arise about a teacher's advice, practitioners can be helped out of many sticky situations by someone in whom they have developed strong trust. This is the role of a *kalyāṇamitta*.

> In Buddhist literature the word *kalyanamitta* is usually translated as a good, honest, or spiritual friend. But *kalyanamitta* means more than just that. The words "sacred friendship" come closest to describing the depth of connection and commitment, the pure and unconditional relationship, that can exist between a student and a spiritual teacher, as well as between friends.[3]

Steven Smith's comments derive from personal experience. He cites a beautiful Burmese expression for the kind of friendship between two people that happens because of good deeds done together or for one another in past lives. '*Ye sek soun de*' (ရေစက်ဆုံးတယ်) literally means 'water drops – come together': two life streams flowing onwards, meeting again. It conveys the strength of a bond that has endured and matured over lifetimes. Indeed, this is the kind of reconnection I have felt with Steven, as he felt with his own *kalyāṇamitta*.

> Meeting my teacher Sayadaw U Paṇḍita was yezed sounde [*ye sek soun de*], an immediate recognition, a reunion, and a radical love at first sight. I had traveled to Burma with a dear friend to ordain as a monk at the monastery of the great Mahasi Sayadaw. My mission was principally Dharma practice and study, and the rich discipline of wearing the robes of monk. I was not looking for a teacher in Burma, rather a profound lineage of teachings. I found

2 Nāvā Sutta (Sn.II.8), trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

3 Smith 1999: 78.

> such teachings, I found an abounding spiritual home, and unexpectedly, I found a teacher. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita was the senior meditation master at the time I took robes. The moment our eyes met in his modest monastic cottage, I realized that I had found a teacher. It was not exactly like finding him. There was just this powerful connection: yezed sounde.
>
> His initial gaze was at once profoundly reassuring and deeply unsettling. The Sayadaw seemed to see into the very core of my being. Light and shadow, vulnerability and shame, were all laid bare – and accepted. The power of his spiritual friendship was immediate. I felt seen, exposed, yet unconditionally accepted.[4]

Not every connection is so deep. A particularly protected, trusting kind of relationship can develop between a meditation master and a student. Such a friendship allows the teacher the opportunity to mentor and guide a practitioner through the most difficult experiences.

A relationship similar to that between a meditation teacher and student – and often overlapping with it – was institutionalized in the early *saṅgha*. Newly ordained monks are required under Theravāda Vinaya to spend their first five years under the guidance of an experienced bhikkhu. The more time I spend in robes, the more grateful I am for this protection. The Buddha's foresight here ensures that as new monks we have a guide to help us make amends for infractions of the complex disciplinary code, that we have a wise friend to point out - with whatever force necessary - the places we have yet to conform with the teachings. In his explication of the monastic discipline, Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out the vital importance of *nissaya*.

> This apprenticeship has formed the human context in which the practice of the Buddha's teachings has been passed down for the past 2,600 years. To overlook it is to miss one of the basic parameters of the life of the Dhamma and Vinaya.[5]

The texts of discipline list responsibilities that such teachers have for their students, which include teaching the *Dhamma* and

4 Smith 1999: 84-5.

5 Thanissaro 1994: Ch. 2, “Nissaya.”

Vinaya, looking after the pupils' welfare, and representing the students to the larger community. The texts also list the duties of a pupil, which include not only helping with washing and cleaning, studying diligently, and being respectful towards the teacher, but also a number that we might not expect of a student. If the teacher begins to feel dissatisfaction with the ordained life or anxiety about having transgressed a rule, for instance, the pupil should try to allay that trouble or find someone else who can. Likewise, in case the teacher is being censored or disciplined by the community, the student is to represent the teacher's interests to the community. Even the role of teaching *Dhamma* is reciprocal: if a teacher begins to hold wrong views, the pupil should try to bring the teacher back in line with the Buddha's teachings or find someone else who can. The relationship of *kalyāṇamitta* goes both ways.[6]

Practitioners can also develop relationships with their comrades that are less intense but similarly conducive to balancing and correcting practice. The vital role played by social context is clear in one discussionwhere the Buddha corrects the venerable Ānanda, saying

> This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.[7]

Many Teachers

> And what is good friendship? Here, Byagghapajja, in whatever village or town a family man dwells, he associates with householders or their sons, whether young or old, who are of mature virtue, accomplished in faith, virtue, generosity and wisdom; he converses with them and engages in discussions with

6 Mahāvagga (I.25.6){I,44ff}; (32.1){I,58ff}, trans. Thanissaro 1994: Ch. 2,.

7 Upaḍḍha Sutta (S.XLV.2){V,2}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

> them. He emulates them in regard to their accomplishment in faith, virtue, generosity and wisdom. This is good friendship.[8]

While many practitioners in the Buddha's day gained support by entering the ordained *saṅgha*, for lay practitioners as well community was, and is, vital for successful practice. Following the spirit evidenced by Pāḷi discourses such as the one cited above, American teachers often point out how group sittings or discussion among people engaged in the practice of awakening can nurture the factors of awakening in each individual.

The term *saṅgha* literally means 'comprising': an assembly; a community. It is used in the Pāḷi texts in three different senses: (1) the ordained community, the *bhikkhu saṅgha*; (2) those who have achieved some stage of awakening, the *ariya saṅgha*; and (3) the community of those who heed the teachings, the *sāvaka saṅgha.* Among native-born Americans, the term is used today almost exclusively in the third sense, to refer to the entire community of like-minded practitioners.[9] In general, Mahāsi practitioners in America have not formed fixed groups. Though retreat centers do provide some community, it is a transitory one; most of the population changes with each retreat and even the staff generally stay only for a few years. A number of practitioners have settled around IMS in central and western Massachusetts; nonetheless, their business and social relationships tend to bring them into contact with more people outside than inside the practice community.

In the Buddha's time, as in some Theravādin traditions in America today, monasteries provided a more stable community. Lifelong renunciates in these settings associate mostly with their fellow renunciates and with lay devotees who frequent the monastery. Nonetheless, a number of separate communities apparently existed at the time of the Buddha, which monks and

---

8 Dīghajāṇu Sutta (A.VIII.54){IV,282}, trans. Ñāṇapoṇika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

9 Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "saṅgha," 667, gives examples from the Pāḷi of all three of these usages.

nuns moved between. Moreover, periods of months or longer were spent in seclusion in the forest on meditation retreats. The importance of maintaining relationships with fellow practitioners of the Eightfold Noble Path appears similar in many different contexts, as evidenced by the many similarities between accounts from the Pāḷi texts and recent publications.

"We take refuge in the Saṅgha through wise friendship," writes one American teacher.[10] Narayan Liebenson Grady's rendition echoes the Buddha's words to Ānanda on the 'entire holy life' in a distinctly modern voice. She describes two primary means by which a 'good friend' can help one practice the Eightfold Noble Path: by giving advice, and by setting an example.

> To have wise friends can help keep the practice alive when our motivation and confidence are faltering. We can read and study and practice, but at times we find ourselves lost. At times the teachings may not seem quite real or quite enough... When we see that others have changed and have grown into deepening levels of freedom through practice, we see that this path of liberation is also available to us.[11]

In addition to acting as an inspiration, a 'good friend' gives advice. Liebenson Grady's description of gentle truth-telling is indeed beautiful to a Western ear. Nonetheless, as her words make clear, if our advisors shy away from pointing out the hard truths, deluding ourselves is easy. This is precisely why the 'fierce compassion' exercised by certain Asian masters can be so valuable. Teachers at IMS tend not to manifest this ferocity with nearly as much force.

> It is a true treasure in this life of attempting to awaken to find friends who will tell us the truth when we ask. It is very easy to find people who will talk behind our backs, but to receive the truth from friends in a kind way is a wonderful gift. We can take refuge in their discernment. We can check out our assumptions and conclusions. Discerning friends can help us examine ways that we habitually cause suffering for ourselves and others... It is

10 Grady 1999: 199.
11 Grady 1999: 199-200.

> hard to walk on this path of awareness without friends gently pointing out our blind spot.[12]

This type of relationship can develop with a number of intimate friends, but a relationship with a meditation master is expressly for this purpose. The teacher offers guidance to balance and correct one's practice, gently or forcefully pointing out experience the student might be missing, or clinging to. No matter how good advice, though, the purity of a teachers' intention is crucial for the guidance to be effective. At one point in the Pāḷi, we find a certain monk - known in other connections for his less than pure intentions - teaching the Dhamma to a large audience of lay people. Hearing that this monk is teaching, the Buddha remarks,

> It's not easy to teach the Dhamma to others, Ānanda. The Dhamma should be taught to others only when five qualities are established within the person teaching. Which five?
>
> The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak step-by-step.'
>
> The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak explaining the sequence [of cause & effect].'
>
> The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak out of compassion.'
>
> The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak not for the purpose of material reward.'
>
> The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak without disparaging myself or others.'
>
> It's not easy to teach the Dhamma to others, Ānanda. The Dhamma should be taught to others only when these five qualities are established within the person teaching.[13]

Goodwill and skill in teaching enables trust to develop. People do not even begin the practice unless they have some faith in its efficacy; conviction that others have achieved success with the practice is no small part of this. The more fully practitioners are able to trust and heed a skilled meditation master, the more

12 Grady 1999: 200-1.

13 Udayi Sutta (A.V.159){III,184}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

direct and smooth their journey will be. Indeed, faith is the first of "five mental factors that must reach a state of dominance in the mind for Awakening to take place."[14] These are the 'controlling faculties': faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. These five factors are progressive: confidence in the practice arouses energy to be mindful; continuous, concentrated mindfulness allows wisdom to develop. Nonetheless, four of these factors must be developed proportionally with each other in order to be effective; the next two sections discuss how a practitioner balances faith and wisdom, energy and concentration, with the help of a teacher. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita is fond of pointing out there can never be too much mindfulness, *sati*.

> ...there are two pairs of faculties, in each of which both faculties should well-counter-balance each other, namely: faith and wisdom on one hand and energy and concentration on the other. Excessive faith with deficient wisdom leads to blind faith, while excessive wisdom with deficient faith leads to [skeptical doubt]. In the same way, great energy with weak concentration leads to restlessness, while strong concentration with deficient energy leads to indolence. For both faculties in each of two pairs, a balanced degree of intensity is desirable. As regards mindfulness, it should be allowed to develop to the highest degree of strength in accordance with the local [Burmese] saying:
>
> *Sati is never in excess, but is always in deficiency*.[15]

Faith And Wisdom

In order even to pay attention to the teachings, one must trust that there is some value to be found there. The vulnerability here is similar in many ways to the "initiative trust" Steiner

14 Thanissaro 1996: Part II, E.

15 Paṇḍita 1995: 297. Thanissaro Bhikkhu gives a comprehensive account of the *indriya* in *Wings to Awakening*.

describes as the first part of the 'hermeneutic motion'.[16] The words 'trust', 'faith', 'confidence', and 'conviction' each convey an aspect of what is referred to in the Pāḷi as *saddhā*. In the beginning stages of the practice, as in translation, persistent effort must be made before any reward is seen. With the development of insight and progressive release from suffering, one naturally develops conviction in the practice.

Just as there are two types of *saddhā*, initiative trust and confirmed faith, the Pāḷi *paññā* refers to both reasoned intellectual understanding of the Buddha's teachings and the intuitive discernment or wisdom that results from practice. When intensive mindfulness practice builds up a certain amount of momentum, faith and wisdom naturally come into balance; before that point, however, the student and the teacher must make an effort to prevent one or the other from becoming excessive. In general, Burmese and American practitioners show different tendencies in this area. Many Burmese put so much faith in the monks and the Pāḷi texts that they feel no impetus to investigate for themselves the truth of the Buddha's claims about suffering and the possibility of freedom from it. In this sense, faith to the point of blindness can oppose initiative trust.[17]

16 Steiner 1998: 312-313.

17 Please see Spiro 1982 for examples of this phenomenon in Burmese society.

The Mahāsi Sayadaw taught in a time of rapid social change; previously quite isolated and secure, Burma and the Burmese Theravāda were exposed to English culture and thought on a massive scale during the colonial period. Burmese educated in the Protestant Anglo system began to question the traditional dogmatism, just as critical study of the Theravādin texts was developing in the West. The 'Protestant Buddhism' that arose around the turn of the last century heavily emphasized aspects of the teachings that reject traditional presentations of truth in favor of first-hand religious experience. One particular passage from the "Kālāma Sutta" is often cited as the Buddha's "Charter of Free Inquiry."[18]

> Come, Kālāmas. Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on reasons, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, 'The ascetic is our teacher.' But when you know for yourselves, 'These things are unwholesome, these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things if undertaken and practised, lead to harm and suffering', then you should abandon them.[19]

Soma Thera comments that this discourse "is justly famous for its encouragement of free inquiry; the spirit of the sutta signifies a teaching that is exempt from fanaticism, bigotry, dogmatism, and intolerance."[20] Bhikkhu Bodhi tempers this assertion by pointing out that the discourse implicitly affirms the value of skillful teachings, such as the one the Buddha is giving.

> On the basis of a single passage, quoted out of context, the Buddha has been made out to be a pragmatic empiricist who dismisses all doctrine and faith, and whose Dhamma is simply a freethinker's kit to truth which invites each one to accept and reject whatever he likes.[21]

18 Soma 1981.

19 Kesamutti Sutta (Kālāma Sutta) (A.III.65){I,189}, trans. Ñāṇapoṇika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

20 Soma 1981.

In any case, the "Kālāma Sutta" and similarly empirically oriented texts have been frequently cited by Asians and Westerners alike. Presentations that rejected external authority in favor of first-hand truth appealed especially to young Westerners during the social revolution of the 1960s and 70s; this ideal inspired more than a few Mahāsi practitioners.[22] The section above on "Theory and Practice" noted that the Mahāsi movement developed as something of a reaction to an establishment that encouraged blind faith in Theravādin institutions rather than personal investigation.[23] The Mahāsi Sayadaw himself often characterized insight in Burmese literally as 'met by oneself' or 'first-hand', phrases translated into English as "empirical knowledge," and the like.[24] Robert Sharf portrays modern Vipassanā practitioners as rejecting Theravādin tradition almost entirely. Even a cursory survey of the Mahāsi Sayadaw's discourses, however, reveals a more balanced approach, inculcating trust in the teachings in order to facilitate the insight that comes of personal practice. The Mahāsi Sayadaw offered strong guidance on how to come by the "personal experience" he advocated. Citing the Pāḷi, he asserted that "to cleanse oneself of impurities, there is but one way: the way of Satipaṭṭhana, in which one contemplates what is going on in one's mind and

21 Bodhi 1988. According to the discourse, the Kalamas were confused because they had been told so many different things by various spiritual authorities; the Buddha's method in leading the villagers' to his conclusions about skillful action assumes their moral good sense; finally, the Kalamas affirm the value of the Buddha's teaching, exclaiming, "Let the Blessed One accept us as lay followers who have gone for refuge from today until life's end."s

22 Goldstein 2002: 88, relates how his journey took him to Bodha Gāya, where he met an Indian teacher in the Mahāsi tradition. This teacher, Munindra-ji, "said something that sealed my decision to stay and practice for as long as I could. "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it." It was this clear, commonsense, undogmatic approach that so inspired me. There was nothing to join, no rituals to observe, no beliefs to follow. The mysteries of the mind would reveal themselves simply through the power of my own growing awareness."

23 Please see the discussion on p.172.

24 E.g. Mahāsi 1986: 13.

body."[25]

Some practitioners display a strong tendency to try to reason their way into insight, to challenge and confirm the teachings on logical grounds. Modern Americans are socialized with a kind of skepticism and logical analysis that is much less emphasized in the Burmese education system. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita observes, evidently from experience, that Westerners "are adept at asking complicated questions. This capacity is good; it will lead to the development of wisdom."[26] At its extreme, however, an insistence on intellectual satisfaction can directly oppose wisdom. This is as true in the Burmese context as in America. The Mahāsi Sayadaw notes that

> Some people who have never meditated may have some doubt and no wonder for only seeing is believing and their skepticism is due to their lack of experience. I myself was a skeptic at one time. I did not like the *Satipaṭṭhāna* method as it makes no mention of *nāma-rūpa*, *anicca*, *anattā* and so forth. But the Sayadaw who taught the method was a learned monk and so I decided to give it a trial. At first I made little progress because I still had a lingering doubt about the method which, in my view, had nothing to do with ultimate reality... It was only later on when I had followed the method seriously that its significance dawned on me.[27]

Sayadaw U Paṇḍita characterizes the hindrance of *vicikicchā*, the opposite of faith, as "the exhaustion of mind which comes about through conjecture." When practitioners cannot muster the "continuous attention which fosters intuitive vipassanā insight," they

> can only interpret experiences based on a very immature depth of knowledge, mixed up with fantasy. This is an explosive mixture. Since the mind is unable to penetrate into the truth, agitation arises, and then perplexity, indecisiveness, which is another aspect of vicikicchā. Excessive reasoning is exhausting.[28]

---

25 Mahāsi 1990: 21.
26 Paṇḍita 1993: 108.
27 Mahāsi 1986: 11-12.
28 Paṇḍita 1993: 72.

When this force grows strong, "every conceivable aspect of practice becomes dubious," one's own abilities, one's teachers, and the method itself. In one Pāḷi discourse, the Buddha confesses that even he cannot help a Brahman endlessly questioning the teachings.[29]

Neither trust nor critical thinking is inherently a problem; in fact they are both necessary; only if this pair gets out of balance will one or the other hinder the development of insight. There are two faces to the Buddha's teachings, as Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it,

> the empiricist face turned to the world, telling us to investigate and verify things for ourselves, and the religious face turned to the Beyond, advising us to dispel our doubts and place trust in the Teacher and his Teaching.[30]

To resolve this apparent contradiction, Bhikkhu Bodhi differentiates the goal of the teachings from the skillful means used to achieve it. Wisdom is an essential component of the "strategy" laid out in the Buddha's teachings, and there are many resonances with scientific inquiry in this area. Faith is another component, essential to carry practitioners of *satipaṭṭhāna* (as well as practitioners of the scientific method) through the inevitable challenges. The final goal of the Buddha's teachings, however, is not "factual information about the world," but rather full liberation from the cycle of suffering. Thus, the Dhamma "addresses us at the bedrock of our being, and there it awakens the faith, devotion and commitment appropriate when the final goal of our existence is at stake."[31] The Pāḷi texts actually affirm the effectiveness of both deep devotion and of critical inquiry, as Bhikkhu Bodhi points out.

> For those who approach the Dhamma in quest of intellectual or emotional gratification, inevitably it will show two faces, and one will always remain a puzzle. But if we are prepared to approach the Dhamma on its own terms, as the way to release from suffering, there will not be two faces at all. Instead we will see

29 U Paṇḍita often refers to this passage, but I have yet locate to it.

30 Bodhi 1985.

31 Bodhi 1985.

> what was there from the start: the single face of Dhamma which, like any other face, presents two complementary sides.[32]

In the history of the Buddha-Sāsana there have been many instances of people rejecting one or the other of its faces. This is evident not only in dry Theravādin scholasticism, but also in American spiritual eclecticism. Western scholars of Buddhism have exhibited similar tendencies towards imbalance, some romanticizing meditation as the source of all practices and rituals that are called 'Buddhist', others, like Sharf, rejecting the 'direct knowing' of *vipassanā* as a defining characteristic of the Eightfold Noble Path.[33]

Human beings from Burma to Barre experience very similar challenges in the practice. While Burmese might be more generally disposed to faith in the Buddha's teachings, whereas many Americans might be stronger in the area of critical investigation, these generalizations are by no means true in every case. Steven Smith has seen "significant numbers of Western students whose faith was aroused easily, if not immediately: Certainly the early Asian seekers, but also successive waves of next generation *yogis*, especially the ones who attune to classical teachings, go to Burma," or have a natural aptitude for the practice, "not the majority granted, but not miniscule numbers either."[34]

U Paṇḍita and other teachers report that among both Burmese and Americans, women tend to develop trust in the teachings more readily, and thus make faster progress in insight. Self-confidence, faith in one's own ability to succeed in the practice, is quite a common deficiency, I have found in discussions in Burma and Barre. As Steven Smith puts it, "we

32 Bodhi 1985.

33 Sharf 1995: 236-40, critiques the work of Paul Griffiths and Lambert Schmithausen as examples of a tendency to relate specific philosophical doctrines to meditative experience instead of intellectual innovation.

34 Steven Smith, in his comments on a draft of *Strong Roots*, March 2003.

could all use more of that."[35] Physical and cultural environment plays a key role in inspiration, but which forms are skillful can vary quite drastically between cultural contexts. The giant Buddha statues and flashing halos of colored LED lights that apparently inspire many Burmese would seem rather ostentatious to Americans, who prefer simple, comfortable accommodations and quiet surroundings that give them a feeling of being in nature. Human ambassadors of the *Buddha-Sāsana* play a critical role in determining how people view the teachings. Until it is confirmed by personal experience, initiative trust is easily broken. In a formula repeated throughout the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the Buddha justifies disciplinary rules for monks by pointing out how misbehavior "neither inspires faith in the faithless nor increases the faithful. Rather, it inspires lack of faith in the faithless and wavering in some of the faithful."[36]

For most practitioners, the support of community is prerequisite. My own initial interest in the practice arose out of connections with my parents' friends who teach meditation; my curiosity compelled me to attend three annual retreats for young adults. The depth of connection and love that developed among participants at those relaxed retreats helped inspire me to persevere through painful periods of more intensive retreat until I could clearly taste the joy and urgency of the practice myself. Perhaps more important, I have developed intimate friendships with a number of people who profess the benefits of the practice, including the freedom of awakening. Being sure that they would not mislead me, I have not struggled with doubt about the possibility of awakening, as far as I can remember. In one passage, the Buddha explains that the confidence necessary to persevere in the practice comes not from logical proof of its benefits, but from trust in friends' testimony.[37] Confidence in the efficacy of the practice, in the skill of one's teacher, and in one's

35 Personal communication, January 2001.

36 E.g. Pārājika I {Vin.III,21}, trans. Thanissaro 1994: intro.

37 Please see the excerpt from the Pubbakotthaka Sutta on p.263.

ability to succeed clears distracting doubts and confusions and stimulates the courageous effort necessary for meditation. In the progression of the Eightfold Noble Path, conviction is also a product of effective practice, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita explains.

> Seeing clearly, bright and unconfused, the mind begins to fill with a new kind of faith, known as verified faith. Verified faith is neither blind nor unfounded. It comes directly from personal experience of reality. One might compare it with the faith that raindrops will get us wet. The scriptures formally characterize this kind of faith as a decision based on personal experience. Thus, we see a very close association between faith and wisdom.[38]

Though insight automatically produces conviction, the reverse is not true: the growth of wisdom from the seed of faith requires determined cultivation. While a certain amount of knowledge about the practice can provide orientation and guidance, only through sustained attention to sensation as it is happening can one dispel the kind of unknowing that sustains the cycle of suffering. Trust in a teacher and in the teachings allows the mind to settle. When the attention is undistracted and tranquil, the process of sensation can be seen clearly. Thus we develop the strength of our own wisdom based on the foundation of faith.

The qualities necessary for someone to succeed in the practice are nurtured and encouraged when other people demonstrate these virtues in their own lives; this is the benefit of having 'good friends', and a meditation teacher in particular. One important role that mentors play in the early stages of one's practice is to help balance the critical inquiry necessary to allay doubts with a steadfast and inspired commitment to awakening.

38 Paṇḍita 1993: 77.

Energy And Concentration

During intensive mindfulness practice, a teacher pays particular attention to balancing the energetic drive of applying mindfulness with the calm steadiness to see clearly. The first of these qualities is termed *viriya* in the Pāḷi, from a root meaning 'hero'. American teachers translations' of *viriya* as "courageous energy" and the like have connotations that are slightly different from those of the term "effort," which U Paṇḍita favors as an English rendering. Such differences between word glosses are indicative of larger issues; particularly characteristic of U Paṇḍita's presentation is an emphasis on strenuous effort for attainment of at least the first level of awakening, 'entry' into the 'stream' of the Eightfold Noble Path.[39] In contrast, American teachers find that their students generally benefit more from guidance that encourages a kind of energetic enthusiasm that is not goal-oriented. The great similarities in purpose and the great differences in presentation between Burmese and American teachers are especially evident at the annual Kyaswa Monastery Foreign Yogi Retreat in the Sagaing Hills of Upper Burma. On one day in January 2002, Steven Smith spoke briefly during the morning instruction period of developing a kind of 'relaxed effort', not striving or getting tense. Not having heard Steven's remarks, Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa that very afternoon began a four part presentation on the importance of strenuous, persistent effort in the practice. Though particular strengths and weaknesses may differ dramatically from one culture to the next, from one person to the next, and from one moment to the next, presentations in Burma and Barre are nonetheless dealing with human beings who function quite similarly.

> The balance between effort and concentration works like this: if one is overenthusiastic and works too hard, the mind becomes agitated and cannot focus properly on the object of observation.

39 *Sotapatti* in the Pāḷi.

> Slipping off, it wanders about, causing much frustration. Too much concentration, however, can lead to laziness and drowsiness. When the mind is still and it seems easy to remain focused in the object, one might begin to relax and settle back. Soon one dozes off.[40]

Energy and inspiration to undertake the practice derives initially from discussion and learning about the teachings; this kind of intellectual understanding is much emphasized in American society. Moreover, the Protestant work ethic has had no small influence on modern Americans, and ours might be described as an extremely goal-oriented society. If so, it should not come as a surprise that often Americans bring a strong will to succeed and a strong – sometimes extreme – type of effort to the practice.

Energy is vital for successful practice, but excessive striving can agitate the mind and lead to doubt and indecision. The following chapter discusses how concentrated mindfulness can gain the strength to protect against unwholesome emotions. We might speculate that such a focused type of attention would come easier to many Burmese practitioners than to most – though certainly not all – of their American counterparts, given our respective strengths. The impressions I have formed over a decade of involvement with American and Burmese meditation centers indeed support this hypothesis.

From U Paṇḍita's perspective, most Westerners are living in the 'heaven realms', and do not even realize the kind of manual labor and physical suffering that most human beings have to bear. Dependent on machines even to do their laundry, not many Westerners really want to put out the effort necessary to maintain continuous mindfulness, U Paṇḍita concludes. Michele McDonald sees a fundamental difference between the cerebral coping strategies that Americans develop to deal with information overload and emotional anxiety and the humble, long-suffering, determined attitude that Burmese women,

40 Paṇḍita 1993: 108-9.

especially, learn in order to deal with the constant physical suffering of manual labor, untreated disease, poverty and hunger.[41] Indeed, the joy in life and generosity of heart that the Burmese people display – despite extreme physical hardships and a political climate of widespread fear – is testimony to the power that the Buddha's teachings can exert on societies that support and preserve them.

One senior American teacher suggests another reason Westerners might have difficulty developing an accepting engagement with sense experiences as they arise: obsessive self-judgment. When various hindrances such as craving or aversion arise, Carol Wilson told meditators at one retreat, it is

> not something that you personally are doing wrong because you're really a bad meditator. And... that's something that I think might be more peculiarly Western, that we... add to it. We personalize so much... On top of experiencing sense desire or ill-will we then say, "It's my fault for experiencing sense desire and ill-will because I should have been able to note the pleasant sight immediately and I didn't." So instead of then being able to notice, "Oh, desire," we go off into a whole world... for the next fifteen minutes of how useless I am as a meditator... Forget sense desire, now you should be noticing rage.
>
> But that's extra. [It is important] to notice when we are doing a personalization.[42]

To the degree a practitioner can sustain an accepting awareness of painful and neutral experiences as well as pleasurable ones, insight develops. According to the Theravādin understanding, this step is crucial in determining whether the cycle of suffering continues or not. When the process of sense experience arising with a pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling tone is not seen clearly, reactive craving for something more or something less results in "this

---

41 Personal communication, October 2002.

42 Carol Wilson, interpreting some remarks on the hindrances made by Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa for Western meditators at the Kyaswa Foreign Yogi Retreat, January 2002. Bracketed insertions with speaker's permission.

entire mass of suffering and stress"; when the process is clearly seen, the cycle is broken.[43] This is one particularly radical – and therefore liberating – aspect of the teachings given by the Buddha in the Pāḷi: the Eightfold Noble Path is not just about going up and up, not just to be practiced when it feels good. Rather, the path proceeds through the whole range of sorrow and joy; the *Dhamma-Vinaya* is for the whole round.

Contemporary presentations cater in very different degrees to the sensual or intellectual gratification demanded by modern 'consumers' of meditation teaching. Walsh suggests that many popular accounts of meditation in the West give short shrift to the unpleasant aspects of intensive practice, tending to emphasize the attractive results of tranquility and peace.[44] This bias is not limited to the West or to the modern world, in fact. Many Burmese are fixated on effects of concentration developed by others, or developed in their own practice. Moreover, the Buddha throughout the Pāḷi texts points to the dangers as well as the benefits of such even the most sublime states: they are fleeting and unsatisfactory, undependable and under no one's control. Thus, the Buddha exhorts us to give up attachment to any state at all, to be satisfied with nothing less than full liberation from suffering. In a recent interview, Jack Kornfield speaks to the importance of this radical message in the United States. Would that we all may live up to his words.

> As the teaching has become more mainstream it has become more comfortable. Practitioners have become more affluent, and if you combine that with greater emphasis on compassion and less ascetic warrior practice, there is a danger that the depth of commitment that's necessary for this revolutionary transformation will get lost... Complacency is always countered by integrity, which is an unswerving love of the truth and a willingness to live it. If the *teachers* don't forget this legacy from the Buddha, then that place in their students that "knows the

---

43 Upādāna Sutta (S.XII.52){II,84}, trans. Thanissaro 1999: Ch. III.

44 Walsh 1981: 76.

> truth" will reawaken too. They will recognize that liberation is our birthright, our own true nature.[45]

Kornfield's remarks underscore the value that I have found in the aggressive teaching style employed by Burmese meditation masters such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita. Though he took special care of me during my time as a monk, at certain points U Paṇḍita's remarks stung my pride and left me in despair. Over time, I have come to realize that Sayadaw U Paṇḍita loved me in the purest way, and continues to. He tried as much as possible make me comfortable in Burma, to build a relationship of trust between us, to foster my intellectual strengths. Yet he was not afraid to force me to face my deepest fears. How many people in this world can offer guidance that is so utterly untainted by the desire to get praise from their students, to avoid students' criticism?

Sayadaw is convinced that human beings can achieve true happiness only by bringing mindfulness to every aspect of experience, from the greatest joys to the most terrible states of anguish. Nothing can be neglected, for the parts of our personalities that we most resist being present with are the central knots that bind us to the cycle of suffering. U Paṇḍita is willing to use any emotional leverage at his disposal to get his students to bring the light of mindfulness to the darkest corners of our hearts.

Indeed, the role of a teacher is to facilitate this process, prodding the student to develop energy where it is lacking, when necessary inspiring the confidence that allows concentration to grow. In the Mahāsi tradition, people on intensive retreat have regular interviews with a teacher. Originally, these consisted of a very short check-in on a daily basis. The relationship between Burmese teachers and their students in an interview is quite formal, and the teacher is often rather strict. One monk told me that the daily interviews were intended to maintain practitioners' effort; students would be loath to come to the interview with

45 Kornfield 2000: 39-40. Italics in original.

nothing to report, and they would only have observations to report if they had paid concentrated attention to the objects of mindfulness. Burmese teachers such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita demand a quick summary of direct experiences, then give a pithy instruction, expecting no further discussion. U Paṇḍita directs his students to begin by reporting the sensations observed at the abdomen during the rise and fall of a breath, and then to report on a few other clear sensations. He wants to know "what occurred, how you noted it," and "what happened," nothing more.[46] By structuring the interview in this way, U Paṇḍita tries to encourage precise awareness of the process of sensation, and to discourage discursive interpretations about the experience.

Western students have presented new problems for Burmese meditation masters: for one, the process of interpretation into English at least doubles the amount of time necessary for each interview; secondly, Americans are socialized with a very different conception of a student-teacher relationship. American students tend to want to engage in a dialogue about the teachings, about their interpretations of how their practice is going, and so on. When U Paṇḍita first came to teach at IMS he scheduled interviews every three minutes, as was customary in Burma; it soon became apparent that this amount of time would not be sufficient to satisfy American students. While U Paṇḍita has not changed his demands for brevity and precision, the American teachers do tend to engage in more of a dialogue with students rather than asking for a report on specific occurrences in the practice. Since practitioners are often given fifteen minutes or longer, interviews in America tend to be scheduled once every two or three days. While the interview style differs between Burma and Barre, in either case, the teacher tries to offer guidance appropriate to the difficulties the student is facing or will likely soon face, based on the stage of concentration and insight exhibited.

46 E.g. Paṇḍita 1993: 25.

The teacher rarely affirms any particular achievement, but rather offers whatever guidance is appropriate for progressing forward. U Paṇḍita often gives the appearance of being even less impressed when he thinks a student may be feeling proud of an experience of concentration or insight. This kind of balancing influence can help practitioners steer clear of many obstacles, as Joseph Goldstein illustrates.

> A good teacher knows when a student is stuck, either in suffering or in a conditioned kind of happiness. Employing a variety of skillful means, the teacher uses everything as fuel for the fire of awakening. At times we need encouragement and loving support, at other times, perhaps a fierce wake-up call. I have appreciated this skill so much in [Sayadaw U Paṇḍita], my Burmese meditation teacher. No matter what glorious experience I have reported to him, he has seemed to remain unimpressed. Although at times I have felt disappointed, he has given me the gift of not settling for anything less than liberation.[47]

U Paṇḍita can be quite forceful as well as quite gentle, depending on what he thinks a student needs. As Michele McDonald puts it, "he doesn't care what you think of him, he just wants you to get free." William Hamilton makes a similar point about U Paṇḍita.

> There are a number of things he will do, especially in private interviews, that are calculated to irritate people if they are not being mindful. He once confided to students of his, who were teachers, that he frequently pretends to totally ignore a student during their interview by reading a book, or doing something else. He said that this was a pretense, and he is really watching them very carefully. Sometimes he is quite sarcastic or brutal in his comments about reports on practice that people give him. At his 1984 IMS retreat, 25% of the class of teachers and advanced

47 Goldstein 1993c: 22. The formulation "U Paṇḍita Sayadaw" is grammatically incorrect in Burmese, as in English, for the same reason that 'John Kennedy President' would be. Some have no doubt been confused by references to particular Sayadaws' titles grammatically akin to 'the United States President', such as 'the Mahāsi Sayadaw', whose monastery was called 'Mahāsi' but whose personal ordained name was 'U Sobhana', or to 'the Paṇḍitārāma Sayadaw', namely 'Sayadaw U Paṇḍita'.

> students dropped out of the three-month-course because his teaching was too difficult for them.[48]

While the various interpreters he has used over the years may have significantly affected U Paṇḍita's impression on certain American students, much of it is due to Sayadaw's own personality and socialization. He will not hesitate to use any emotional leverage at his disposal to push people to apply mindfulness energetically and persistently. Once, when I reported that particular incessant mind states were overwhelming me, Sayadaw told me curtly that of course that would be true if I did not know how to be mindful, then got up and walked out of the room, shutting the door with a resounding thud. For those committed enough to the practice to sacrifice all of their energy and all of their arrogance, such pressure can be quite effective. U Paṇḍita is not particularly concerned if some people can not handle his forceful style; he often remarks that the *Buddha-Dhamma* is meant for a select few, not for the lazy or the heedless.[49] It would seem that this approach is not new; in one discussion with a horse-trainer named Kesi, the Buddha likens his own profession to Kesi's. The Buddha trains "a tamable person" sometimes with mildness, but also with harshness when necessary, and if neither of these work, he dismisses the student.[50]

---

48 Hamilton 1995: 109.

49 C.f. A.VIII.30{IV,232}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "This Dhamma is for one who is modest, not for one who is self-aggrandizing. This Dhamma is for one who is content, not for one who is discontent. This Dhamma is for one who is reclusive, not for one who is entangled. This Dhamma is for one whose persistence is aroused, not for one who is lazy. This Dhamma is for one whose mindfulness is established, not for one whose mindfulness is confused. This Dhamma is for one whose mind is centered, not for one whose mind is uncentered. This Dhamma is for one endowed with discernment, not for one whose discernment is weak. This Dhamma is for one who enjoys non-complication, who delights in non-complication, not for one who enjoys & delights in complication."

50 Kesi Sutta (A.IV.111){II,112}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

Such a style is not for everyone though, and many Burmese monks – as well as Burmese nuns and American lay teachers – use a more gentle style of teaching. Whatever the teaching method, its aim should be an equipoise between faith and wisdom, energy and concentration, according to the Pāḷi texts. The Buddha demonstrates this important role of a teacher, and a skillful method of teaching, in his discourse to the monk Soṇa. When the Buddha comes upon him, Soṇa has apparently been striving to the point of injuring his body, doing solitary walking meditation until the soles of his feet were split and bleeding. The Buddha gives the analogy of a stringed instrument,

> "Now what do you think, Soṇa. Before, when you were a house-dweller, were you skilled at playing the vina?"
>
> "Yes, lord."
>
> "And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too taut, was your vina in tune & playable?"
>
> "No, lord."
>
> "And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too loose, was your vina in tune & playable?"
>
> "No, lord."
>
> "And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned to be right on pitch, was your vina in tune & playable?"
>
> "Yes, lord."[51]

Having drawn a beatiful analogy, the Buddha gently brings his student back to the issue at hand: trying too hard. "In the same way, Soṇa, over-aroused energy leads to restlessness; overly slack energy leads to lethargy. So here, settling on a calm energy, hit on a balance of the faculties, Soṇa, and from there take up your focus."[52] The strengths of faith and wisdom, of energy and

---

51 Soṇa Sutta (A.VI.55){III,375}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

52 Soṇa Sutta (A.VI.55){III,375}, author's trans. Though I could not do better than to quote Thanissaro Bhikkhu's rendering of the first part of this discourse, his translation of this last line seems to confuse 'calm', in the compound *vīriya-samathaṃ*, with *samataṃ*; Thanissaro gives 'right pitch' in the first phrase, and 'pitch' in the second. The rest of my differences from

concentration can vary greatly between different practitioners, and even over the course of an individual's practice. The necessity of balance between these two pairs, however, is common to all human beings doing the practice. Fostering this kind of equipoise seems to have been the primary role of 'good friends' in the *Dhamma-Vinaya* from the time the Pāḷi discourses were composed through to today.

> This balancing of faculties is an aspect of meditation that teachers must understand quite thoroughly in order to guide their students. The most basic way of maintaining balance, and of reestablishing it when it is lost, is to strengthen the remaining controlling faculty, mindfulness.[53]

his translation are more matters of taste.

53 Paṇḍita 1993: 109.

VII

Tranquility

the clarity of concentration

> The fourth protection is *samathā·nuggahita*, the protection of concentration, which keeps off the caterpillars and weeds of unwholesome states of mind. As we practice we make a strong effort to be aware of whatever is actually arising at the six sense doors – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind – in the present moment. When the mind is sharply focused and energetic in this way, greed, hatred and delusion have no opportunity to creep in. Thus, concentration can be compared to weeding the area around the plant, or to applying a very wholesome and natural type of pesticide.[1]

The term *samatha*, translated here as concentration, refers to the settling and unification of attention. In the excerpt above, U Paṇḍita describes a particular kind of concentration, that which arises from the continuous establishment of mindfulness, in which the attention is focused on whatever aspect of sense experience predominates at a given moment in time. Since these objects of mindfulness are continually changing and shifting, absorption in one object cannot be developed. The third section of this chapter discusses how "Guarding the Senses" with

---

1 Paṇḍita 1993: 23. In the original, Sayadaw just mentions general 'appropriate methods of keeping bugs off' and 'appropriate methods of removing them', but "a very wholesome and natural type of pesticide" would fulfill this prescription well.

mindfulness facilitates insight into the psycho-physical process as it is occurring.

A different type of concentration is developed by focusing on a single concept. One can begin this kind of practice by focusing on an ideal of a quality such as lovingkindness or equanimity. Alternatively, the practitioner can focus on a colored disk or a light, internalizing an image of it. All of these conceptual entities – as opposed to direct sense experience – can appear quite static over time, so the attention can become extremely one-pointed. *Mettā* meditation, for instance, begins by focusing on an idea of loving oneself or other dear living beings, using this concept to activate the benevolent mental quality of lovingkindness. High levels of absorption, *jhāna*, can be developed with such practices. Concentration on a conceptual object, however, is an enterprise quite different from the concentration on sense experience developed in *satipaṭṭhāna*, and the two can lead to very different ends.[2]

Nonetheless, both types of concentration function to protect awareness from attachment, aversion, delusion and other unwholesome qualities. Neither type of concentration can arise when one is agitated by the demands of intellectual analysis or discussion. Thus, both depend on a certain amount of seclusion from business and social responsibilities, and on a tranquil and quiet environment.

2 Gimello 1978: 188, suggests that concentration may be included under the category of mysticism, but that insight may not. While his distinction between insight and concentration is useful, Gimello's interpretation of *vipassanā* as "meditatively intensified reflection upon the basic categories of Buddhist doctrine," is contradicted by a number of Pāḷi texts and modern teachers cited in the chapter on "Insight." Please see the discussion of Gimello's work beginning on p.254.

Environmental Protection

In the Pāḷi, the Buddha presents a path of awakening that differs from Greco-Judaic teachings in a number of respects. Hebrew priests and Greek philosophers engaged in economic and sexual activity. In contrast, Indian spiritual seekers at the time of the Buddha were directed to a celibate, homeless, mendicant lifestyle. The Pāḷi texts repeatedly encourage going forth from the 'householder's life'. Such a renunciation is no escape from the 'world' as the Pāḷi texts define it: the continuum of sensation.

> I declare, O friend, that by going it is not possible to know, see or reach the end of the world, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, and is not reborn... But I do not say that one can make an end to suffering without having reached the end of the world. And I further proclaim, friend, that it is in this fathom-long body with its perceptions and thoughts that there is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world.[3]

Projecting the Western dichotomy between secular and sacred onto ancient Indian society, some have perceived Buddhist traditions as rejecting or denying the 'world'.[4] Modern American practitioners, however, have made much of practice in the social world. Jack Kornfield, for instance, describes the "Path of Parenting, Path of Awakening."[5] Such an emphasis on developing insight in the household life, and the general reluctance to 'leave the world' of sexual and economic activity may well be derived in part from Greco-Judaic ideals of spirituality.

On the other hand, in a certain sense, the conventions of modern life may give us too much isolation already. In Burmese

---

3 Rohitassa Sutta (A.IV.45){II,47}, trans. Ñāṇapoṇika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi. This instance is somewhat exceptional (though repeated at S.II.26) in that the Four Noble Truths are stated in respect to the world, *loka*, rather than in respect to suffering, *dukkha*, as is more frequently found.

4 Max Weber's was perhaps the seminal instance of this very common perception among modern academics.

5 Kornfield 1999.

village life, children go to the fields on their mothers backs, live with their grandparents, and are raised by a tightly-knit village community. In contrast, children in industrialized societies spend a great deal of time being cared for by proxy: in child care, in front of the TV, often distant from their extended family. I do not wish to sentimentalize pre-industrial village life, there is much injustice and suffering in that system as well. Nonetheless, in terms of qualities such as self-acceptance, generosity, and trust, it is my distinct impression that most Burmese come to the practice far better endowed. Saydaw U Paṇḍita has coined a name for the complex of symptoms he sees often in Western meditators: 'the missing-love disease'. The great Italian scholar of Buddhism Julius Evola suggests that a spiritual seeker amidst the impersonal rush of modern life

> may feel himself more alone and detached and nomad than he would have done in the time of the Buddha, in conditions of physical isolation and of actual wandering. The greatest difficulty, in this respect, lies in giving this sense of internal isolation, which today may occur to many almost spontaneously a positive, full, simple, and transparent character, with elimination of all traces of aridity, melancholy, discord, or anxiety. Solitude should not be a burden... but rather, a natural, simple, and free disposition.[6]

The Buddha's strategy for awakening is not one of avoiding suffering; on the contrary, "the only way out is through."[7] However, the Pāḷi discourses describe those who have not achieved full awakening as intoxicated and diseased by unwholesome qualities such as attachment, aversion, and delusion. There is plenty of suffering to work within an individual 'world of experience', no matter how secluded from society. Just as someone with a serious disease of the immune system would temporarily avoid infectious situations as well as strenuous activity, until the defilements are extinguished, healing is

6 Evola 1996: 103.

7 Michele McDonald often relates this gem of wisdom from a conversation with Robert Aitken and Steven Smith.

facilitated by seclusion from situations that might provoke greed, lust, pride, jealousy, ill-will, and so on. One *Dhammapada* verse thus defines a renunciate, *samaṇa*, as one "living in calmness," *samacariyā*.[8] Indeed, clear awareness of suffering requires concentration, and concentration only develops when the attention dwells on the object of meditation without being distracted.

The Mahāsi Sayadaw advocated a system of intensive retreat that temporarily isolates the practitioner from certain aspects of society. Having one's food and basic requirements taken care of, limiting speech to short discussions with the meditation teacher, and devoting all one's energy to mindfulness practice can greatly facilitate the development of concentration during periods of retreat.

One significant difference between retreats in America and in Burma is the degree of separation between men and women. As far as I know, within the Mahāsi tradition celibacy is always presented as a necessary precept during retreat; the excitement and emotional agitation involved in sexual relationships is simply incompatible with the development of strong concentration. Male and female practitioners therefore sleep separately on retreat. In Burma, there are often separate meditation halls and sometimes different eating areas for men and women. U Paṇḍita presents this as a necessary precaution in order to avoid provoking lust, which would hinder his students' practice. There are certain aspects of the physical arrangements in Burma that might give some people reason to perceive misogynistic tendencies, though: at the city center of Paṇḍitārāma the upper story of the meditation hall is for men, the lower for women; likewise, in the dining hall, monks and lay men sit up front, closer to the Buddha image, while nuns and lay women sit at the back of the dining hall.

8 Dhp.388{Dhp.,56}, cited (and translated?) by Bond 1996: 24.

When Burmese monks teach in America, the meditation halls are often divided into two halves, women on the left side, for instance, men on the other. When the teachers are American practitioners of the Mahāsi system, however, usually there are no such divisions, and practitioners of both sexes sit interspersed with each other.[9] These decisions may be informed by the attitude that there can be no 'separate but equal' sides of the meditation hall, or perhaps by the recognition that as long as people with varying sexual orientations are sitting together, trying to seclude everyone from the objects of their sexual desire is futile. Given the Theravādin tradition's approach of temporary seclusion from situations that provoke hindrances to practice, however, if heterosexual impulses predominate in a particular group, a large degree of separation between the sexes may make a good deal of sense during a retreat. Apparently, sexual attraction was a strong force in the Buddha's society, as it is today.

> No other form do I know, [bhikkhus], that so persists in obsessing the mind of a man as the form of a woman...
>
> No other sound... scent... taste... touch do I know, [bhikkhus], that so persists in obsessing the mind of a man as the touch of a woman. The touch of a woman persists in obsessing the mind of a man.
>
> No other form do I know, [bhikkhus], that so persists in obsessing the mind of a woman as the form of a man...
>
> No other sound... scent... taste... touch do I know, [bhikkhus], that so persists in obsessing the mind of a woman as the touch of a man. The touch of a man persists in obsessing the mind of a woman.[10]

If Americans are somewhat less strict in terms of seclusion from contact with the opposite sex, Burmese practitioners seem to be less beholden to restrictions on chatting. In the Mahāsi

9 The annual three month retreat at IMS, where men and women sit on separate sides of the hall, is an exception to this rule.

10 Pariyadana Sutta (A.I.1-10){I,1ff}, trans. Ñāṇapoṇika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

System, practitioners usually attend one daily talk by the meditation teacher and brief but regular interviews. Aside from these instances and urgent communications with retreat staff, practitioners are encouraged to maintain the 'noble silence' referred to in the Pāḷi.

> It is fitting for you clansmen who have gone forth out of faith from the home life into homelessness to sit together to discuss the Dhamma. When you gather together, bhikkhus, you should do either of two things: hold discussions on the Dhamma or maintain noble silence.[11]

While some have taken this 'noble silence' to refer exclusively to the quieting of intellectual activity at the second stage of absorption, the Mahāsi Sayadaw follows the commentary by including less intense kinds of attention to the object of meditation.[12] In this sense, noble silence means refraining from reasoning and discussion, whether by multiple people or a solitary thinker, in favor of direct awareness of sensations as they arise. I have observed that when out of sight of the meditation master, Burmese practitioners on retreat tend to talk with each other a good deal more than Americans do. On other hand, from most reports it seems that Americans on retreat tend talk to themselves a good deal more than their Burmese counterparts do. Indeed, Roger Walsh describes a number of Asian meditation masters, including the Mahāsi Sayadaw, taking note of the way Western practitioners spend a great deal of time on the cushion doing self-psychoanalysis.

> Psychotherapy focuses primarily on changing mental contents at the symbolic level, for example, by changing images, thoughts, fantasies, or emotions... The Eastern teachers thought that while this might sometimes be useful, for a significant number of

11 Ariyapariyesanā Sutta (M.26){I,161}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

12 As Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi paraphrase the MA{II,169} in the endnote on page 1216 of their *Majjhīma Nikāya* translation, the "the second jhāna and one's basic meditation subject are both called "noble silence" (*ariyo tuṇhībhāvo*). Those who cannot attain the second jhāna are advised to maintain noble silence by attending to their basic meditation subject."

> Western practitioners this focus proved to be a limiting factor preventing an awareness of more subtle mental mechanisms.[13]

Settling The Intellect

Within various traditions descended from the Buddha, as within modern Buddhist Studies, there have been many debates about the nature of *vipassanā* and prerequisites for such insight to arise. Richard Gombrich presents evidence that "Enlightenment without meditation was probably never envisaged by the Buddha or in the earliest texts."[14] Gombrich uses textual evidence to recreate the history of how some groups of monks, by narrowly interpreting certain passages, came to the conclusion that awakening could be pursued by purely intellectual analysis without concentrated meditation practice. This movement away from meditation had apparently begun by the time of the Asokan missions 150 years after the Buddha's death, but Gombrich reasons that such a major doctrinal reversal could not have occurred while the first generation of disciples was alive.[15]

Later Theravādins systematized and elaborated on the analyses of experience presented in the Pāḷi discourses, producing an extensive literature on Abhidhamma. The dominance of the scholastic tradition in the Burmese Theravāda

---

13 Walsh 1981: 76.

14 Gombrich 1996: 131-2.

15 Northern India became unified politically under the Moriyan emperors in the centuries after the Buddha's death, which likely resulted in a much more uniform society than before. It was during just this time that Gombrich 1996 estimates the view of intellectual enlightenment to have gained popularity. Such evidence supports our hypothesis that people become more interested in the surety of meditative experience and direct knowledge when diverse world-views are interacting in a dynamic social context, and that as a society becomes more isolated and homogeneous, emphasis often shifts to institutionalized intellectual study and analysis of the Buddha teachings.

has been discussed above in the section on "Theory and Practice"; certain scholars came to regard reasoned knowledge and contemplation of such formulations as liberating insight itself. Noting that this is a controversial issue, Thanissaro Bhikkhu points to a number of Pāḷi texts suggesting that awakening is to be gained from the first or higher stages of absorption, in which internal verbalization and discursive thought are progressively quieted.[16] One discourse puts it in no uncertain terms.

> Knowledge of the ending of the effluents, as it is actually present, occurs to one who is concentrated, I tell you, and not to one who is not concentrated. So concentration is the path, [bhikkhus]. Non-concentration is no path at all.[17]

In another discourse, Ānanda describes four different paths to full awakening, each including the factor of concentration.

> There is the case where a monk has developed insight preceded by tranquillity. As he develops insight preceded by tranquillity, the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it & pursuing it – his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.
>
> Then there is the case where a monk has developed tranquillity preceded by insight...
>
> Then there is the case where a monk has developed tranquillity in tandem with insight...
>
> Then there is the case where a monk's mind has its restlessness concerning the Dhamma [Comm: the corruptions of insight] well under control. There comes a time when his mind grows steady inwardly, settles down, and becomes unified & concentrated. In him the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it & pursuing it – his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.[18]

According to the subcommentary, the first of these descriptions refers to one who employs tranquility as the vehicle

16 Thanissaro 1996: Part III, F, cites A.IX.36{IV,422ff} and A.XI.17{V,342}.

17 Sīhanāda Sutta (A.VI.64){III,420}, trans. Thanissaro 1996: Part III, F.

18 Yuganaddha Sutta (A.IV.170){II,157}. The bracketed insertion of the commentarial explanation is by the translator, Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

of practice, the second to "one who makes insight the vehicle," *vipassanā-yānika*.[19] This is the method generally prescribed in the Mahāsi tradition. Concentration is not absent from this method; as insight progresses, the awareness becomes increasingly focused on whatever sense experience happens to be arising in the moment. In fact, the Mahāsi Sayadaw highly recommended that those who have the ability develop deep tranquility absorptions, as in the first type of practice, insight preceded by tranquility; many find this level of focus impossible due to mental agitation, even with a static conceptual object.

> When jhanic concentration is achieved, that concentration can be used as an ideal basis for Vipassanā meditation. Alternatively, if jhanic stage is not attainable, access concentration may be tried for and this concentration, when attained, may be used for Vipassanā meditation. If even access concentration is not attainable, one has to work for the momentary concentration of the Vipassanā meditation. Once it is attained, the Vipassanā insights will become developed in their own sequence till the Noble Path is accomplished.[20]

Senior Mahāsi instructors such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita have guided practitioners accomplished in insight to employ tranquility in various ways, either developing it and then turning to *vipassanā*, as in Ānanda's first path, or entering into *jhānic* absorptions and then exiting to perceive changing experience, which is described as the third path.

The most widely prescribed concentration practice in the Mahāsi tradition is that of cultivating lovingkindness, *mettā-bhāvanā*. Verses of lovingkindness are chanted daily by Burmese practitioners at Mahāsi meditation centers; these chants are generally in Burmese, however, and intensive *mettā* meditation is usually prescribed only for quite advanced practitioners. This may be why the young Western practitioners who went to Asia in the 1970s and 80s were not exposed to much *mettā* practice, and

19 Bhikkhu Bodhi quotes the Aṅguttaraṭikā on page 294, in note 67 to his translation of A.IV.170.

20 Mahāsi 1989: 81.

why *mettā* practice was not widely taught in the early years at American Vipassanā centers. Both chanting and intensive meditation on *mettā* have become quite popular in the last decade, however. Gil Fronsdal speculates that "the American near-obsession with happiness and love has influenced the American teachers to put special emphasis on loving-kindness."[21] Nonetheless, he does note how, in addition to its use in developing concentration, *mettā* practice can help allay aversive mental states in those with "a strong tendency to self-criticism or self- depreciation," thus allowing more ease in developing mindfulness. Indeed, Michele McDonald suggests that it is 'the American near-obsession' with self-judgment, rather than an obsession with happiness, that most influences her to teach *mettā*. In any case, the quality of lovingkindness is an integral aspect of true mindfulness. "It softens the awareness so that we can be with things as they are."[22]

The diverse techniques for developing the stages of absorption, *jhāna*, range from the recitation of phrases to staring at colored disks to concentration on emotions such as loving-kindness. These powerful practices develop mental health and stability. The resulting absorption, at its most rarified levels, is said to be the basis for occult powers, as well.

Practices of deep absorption are present in traditions from many different human societies, and were employed by many Indian teachers, including the Buddha. Many philosophical ideas of Brahma or God in ancient India derived from meditators experiencing a state of bliss or even more sublime states, and then taking this to be a permanent source from which beings emerge, and to which they return. The Buddha's teachings in the Pāḷi discourses were radical when they were composed, as they are now, because they characterize any aspect of experience as a temporary visitor, rapidly arising and passing. Whether for a few

21 Fronsdal 1998: 174.

22 Personal communication, October 2002.

moments or for a lifetime, tranquility can protect the mind from unwholesome states of mind only temporarily. According to the Pāḷi texts, such concentration cannot uproot latent unwholesome tendencies without direct awareness of psycho-physical phenomena arising and passing, that is, the establishment of mindfulness.

Guarding The Senses

The continuity of mindfulness developed in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a particular type of concentration. When there is no awareness of psycho-physical phenomena as they arise and pass away, this is a moment of delusion, of not seeing clearly, of *avijjā*. As mindfulness becomes established, on the other hand, there occur more and more moments of seeing clearly. In other words, increasing the concentration of mindfulness allows insight to deepen and progress.

Since all the factors of consciousness arise dependently with the meeting of a sense object and a sense organ, according to the Theravādin understanding, *vijjā* passes away with these factors in every moment. When there clear awareness is present, though, it has the remarkable effect of preventing – or rather of not triggering – the whole process of emotional and intellectual proliferation about a particular sense experience. This, apparently, is what the Buddha meant by perfect seclusion. His remarks come in response the report of a monk called 'Elder'.

> "Venerable Sir, I enter the village for alms alone, I return alone, I sit alone in private, I undertake walking meditation alone. It is in such a way that I am a lone dweller and speak in praise of dwelling alone."
>
> "That is a way of dwelling alone, Elder, I do not deny this. But as to how dwelling alone is fulfilled in detail, listen that and attend closely, I will speak."

> "Yes, Venerable Sir."
>
> "And how, Elder, is dwelling alone fulfilled in detail? Here, Elder, what lies in the past has been abandoned, what lies in the future has been relinquished, and desire and lust for present forms of individual existence has been thoroughly removed. It is in such as way, Elder, that dwelling alone is fulfilled in detail."[23]

Satipaṭṭhāna aims at this very goal. Mindfulness practice has been refined and developed in various teaching lineages, but a basic formulation is given in the "Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta," where the Buddha describes how a practitioner "discerns" that he is breathing deeply, breathing shallowly, sitting, or walking, as these are occurring.

> Furthermore, when going forward & returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward & looking away... when bending & extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe & his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, & savoring... when urinating & defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert.[24]

These comprehensive formulas are repeated for painful, pleasant, and neutral experience, and for mental states such as passion, aversion, commitment, and concentration. Practitioners are advised to discern "Such is form, such its origination, such its disappearance. Such is feeling... Such is perception... Such are fabrications... Such is consciousness, such its origination, such its disappearance," and so on for a long list of psycho-physical phenomena including the factors involved in the process of awakening itself. The Buddha concludes by appreciating the singular nature of this precious establishment of mindfulness. "Solitary is this path, bhikkhus, for the purification of beings, for going beyond sorrow and grief, for the passing of pain and distress, for arriving at the way, for the realization of Nibbāna..."[25]

---

23 Therānama Sutta (S.XXI.10){II,283}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

24 Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D.22){II,292}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

25 Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D.22){II,315}, author's trans.

The terms employed in the "Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta" might be used to argue that insight consists of an intellectual understanding or reasoned deconstruction of experience, or these terms might simply be an interpretation and articulation of clearly seen sensate experience. In any case, this discourse advocates being fully aware of the objects of mindfulness and discerning their arising and their cessation.

All of the modern Burmese and American teachers of mindfulness meditation I have come into contact with unanimously agree that 'clear seeing' does not include intellectual analysis of experience. In this, they follow the Buddha's advice to Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth.

> Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how [you] should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress.[26]

Such an approach is evident in U Paṇḍita's description of the second factor of awakening, investigation, which he likens to a flashlight illuminating "what is present" in a darkened room.

> In meditation, investigation is not carried out by means of the thinking process. It is intuitive, a sort of discerning insight that... shows us the characteristics of *paramattha dhamma*, or ultimate realities, which simply means objects that can be experienced directly without the mediation of concepts.[27]

Similarly, American teachers often instruct practitioners to bring 'bare awareness' to experience at the six sense doors. "We are cultivating a pre-verbal, non-judgmental awareness," as

26 Bāhiya Sutta (Ud.I.10){Ud.,8}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
27 Paṇḍita 1993: 104-5.

Steven Smith likes to put it. Such attention, however, does not come readily to most novice practitioners. Therefore, certain strategies are used to develop this quality of mind, to make it manifest in more and more moments of experience. The Mahāsi tradition emphasizes instructions in the "Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta" such as "when walking, the monk discerns that he is walking... however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it."[28] In order to develop concentration, beginners are advised to use 'soft mental noting' to direct the awareness towards present experience. Practitioners usually begin by concentrating on the sensations of the breath at the abdomen, noting 'rising' and 'falling', while carefully investigating all the sensations involved in the process. As the Mahāsi Sayadaw makes clear in his basic instructions, the emphasis is on bringing awareness to the sensations just as they are happening, rather than trying to alter the breath to make it shorter or longer, deeper or shallower.[29]

28 Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D.22){II,292}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

29 Mahāsi 1978: 6-7, "With every act of breathing, the abdomen rises and falls, which movement is always evident. This is the material quality known as *vāyodhātu* (the element of motion). One should begin by noting this movement, which may be done by the mind intently observing the abdomen. You will find the abdomen rising when you breathe in, and falling when you breathe out. The rising should be noted mentally as 'rising', and the falling as 'falling'. If the movement is not evident by just noting it mentally, keep touching the abdomen with the palm of your hand. Do not alter the manner of your breathing. Neither slow it down, nor make it faster. Do not breathe too vigorously, either. You will tire if you change the manner of your breathing. Breather steadily as usual and note the rising and falling of the abdomen as they occur. Note it mentally, not verbally." Mahāsi 1978 writes of the various sensations often encountered as mindfulness and concentration gain momentum. He talks of the subtle chills and thrills, pervading joy and waves of terror that accompany heightened sensitivity. The goal, though, is clear throughout: to progress through the stages of insight and concentration to reach the Path and Fruition knowledge and attain *Nibbāna*.

Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 454, come to a curious conclusion about the Mahāsi technique, however. They note that Sri Laṅkan "monks at Vajirārāma, a famous Colombo monastery, who had themselves studied *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, attacked" the Mahāsi method. Gombrich and Obeyesekere cite Kassapa Thera, Foreword to *A Collection of Articles on*

Likewise, in walking meditation one notes 'lifting, moving, placing', or in general activities such as eating, 'lifting, touching, tasting, swallowing,' and so on.

> Labeling technique helps us to perceive clearly the actual qualities of our experience, without getting immersed in the content. It develops mental power and focus. In meditation, we seek a deep, clear, precise awareness of the mind and body. This direct awareness shows us the truth about our lives, the actual nature of mental and physical processes.[30]

Noting is used to focus the attention on experience as it is occurring, not to analyze it conceptually. Likewise, there is no need to impose theoretical concepts such as 'impermanence', 'suffering', or 'nonself' on experience, looking for these characteristics can in fact hinder the development of insight, according to U Paṇḍita. On the other hand, the more there is full attention to whatever experience is occurring in the present, the more clearly one can see these phenomena arising and passing of their own accord, offering no lasting happiness. At higher levels of concentration, in fact, intellectual activity is attenuated, and with it the noting technique. At such times, noting no longer serves its purpose of developing concentration anyway. According to U Paṇḍita, the conceptual labeling drops away all together at a particular stage of insight when the dissolution of

---

Meditation (Colombo: Henry Prelis, 1957), who "quoted the Mahāsī Sayādaw himself to show that the deep breathing he recommended could lead to strange physical sensations, swaying, trembling, and even loss of consciousness" (my emphasis). Thus, Gombrich and Obeyesekere's conclusion that the Mahāsi technique "if followed to the letter could take [practitioners] into trance states very like possession," is clearly a result of a misunderstanding of the method. Perhaps this is due to Kassapa Thera, but in any case Gombrich, at least, sullies an otherwise excellent career of scholarship by failing to check for himself the basic *satipaṭṭhāna* instructions of the Mahāsi Sayadaw, which clearly advocate not breathing abnormally deeply, and moreover are designed specifically to avoid entering deep states of concentration in which one cannot be aware of arising and passing phenomena, but rather direct the practitioner to maintain the low level of 'access concentration' conducive to insight.

30 Paṇḍita 1993: 16.

each successive sensation is most apparent; this *baṅga ñāṇa*, though, "has nothing to do with thinkers."[31] I have seen both Burmese and American teachers advise students to drop the noting when it is really interfering with direct awareness, but even advanced practitioners find the labeling technique useful at the beginning of retreat and other times when concentration is not strong. Though noting does take extra effort, and many practitioners resist it for that reason, it can be very beneficial. One teacher, Carol Wilson, told practitioners at the Kyaswa Retreat in 2002 that to her chagrin, noting was really helping her to connect with the breath.

In a number of respects the innovations by modern Vipassanā teachers reproduce emphases found in the Pāḷi texts, and therefore presumably at some early point in the history of the Buddha-Sāsana. At least for the last 1500 years or so, the Theravāda has put great emphasis on scholastic knowledge and on absorption practices. The last century has seen the rapid growth of practices that use concentrated mindfulness to develop insight, an approach that the Pāḷi texts assert is necessary for awakening.

> Two qualities share in clear seeing. Which two? Tranquillity & insight.
>
> What benefit does developed tranquility bring? The mind becomes developed. What benefit does a developed mind bring? What is abandoned is lust.
>
> What benefit does developed insight bring? Wisdom becomes developed. What benefit does developed wisdom bring? What is abandoned is not-seeing-clearly.[32]

31 "အတွေးသမားနဲ့ မဆိုင်ဘူး" U Paṇḍita, Hse Main Gon Forest Center Retreat, December 2000, consecutive interpretation by U Kyaw Kyaw.

32 Vijja-bhagiya Sutta (A.II.30){I,61}, author's trans.

IV

Insight

seeing chaos as chaotic

Having discussed skillful conduct, learning, discussion, and concentration, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita extends the Commentary's plant analogy to the final support of right view.

> If these first four protections are present, insights have the opportunity to blossom. However, yogis tend to become attached to early insights and unusual experiences related to strong concentration. Unfortunately, this will hinder their practice from ripening into the deeper levels of vipassanā. Here, the fifth protection, *vipassanā·nuggahita*, comes into play. This is meditation which continues forcefully at a high level, not stopping to dawdle in the enjoyment of peace of mind nor other pleasures of concentration. Craving for these pleasures is called *nikanti tanhā*. It is subtle, like cobwebs, aphids, mildew, tiny spiders – sticky little things that can eventually choke off a plant's growth.[1]

The early Pāḷi texts, the Theravādin commentators, and modern meditation masters are unanimous, to the best of my knowledge, in defining *vipassanā* to mean 'knowledge of things as they are': *yathābhūtañāṇa*.[2] In one passage the Buddha asks a

1 Paṇḍita 1993: 23-4.

2 The corresponding Burmese expression "ဖြစ်တဲ့ အတိုင်း," employs the verb 'ဖြစ်' (*pyit*), which can be used in the sense of 'to arise', 'to become', or 'to happen' as well as 'to be'. In the context of discourse on mindfulness meditation, *vipassanā* or 'insight' is used to refer to seeing 'knowing things

group of his students whether, "knowing and seeing in this way," they might not tell others that they were just teaching things in this way out of respect for their teacher. The *bhikkhus* say that they would not. Neither would they claim others' proclamations as their source, nor would they now look for another teacher, nor would they return to the various recluses' and priests' rites and rituals, taking these to be the essence.

> 'Do you speak only of what you have known, seen, and understood for yourselves?'
>
> 'Yes, venerable sir.'
>
> 'Good, bhikkhus. So you have been guided by me with this Dhamma, which is visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, onward leaning, to be experienced by the wise for themselves.[3]

Thus the emphasis on personal experience is present not just in European-influenced modern renditions, but also as an integral theme of the Pāḷi discourses composed in ancient India.

---

just as they have become' both in the sense of truthfulness conveyed by 'things just as they are' and in the sense of present time awareness conveyed by 'things just as they arise'.

Kalupahana 1992: 52, contends that "The past participle *bhūta*, 'become', turned out to be the most appropriate term to express the radical empiricism of the Buddha, which avoided the essentialist enterprise of searching for ultimate objectivity... " The Buddha of the Pāḷi does indeed set aside the project of formulating or discovering absolutely true statements about reality as not relevant or useful for his project of ending suffering. At M.38{I,265}, his disciples 'knowing and seeing in this way' are shown to set aside questions about what they were in the past, what they will be in the future, and even about whether they are or not in the present. Nonetheless, as the Buddha characterizes it in this same discourse, his *dhamma* is – in theory and in practice – *akāliko*, lit. 'timeless', or immediate. Thus modern *Vipassanā* teachers' use of the expression 'things as they are' is not contradicted by Kalupahana's interpretation, as becomes clearer on 51, "the past participle *bhūta*, meaning 'become', when used as a synonym for 'true', brings out clearly the anti-essentialist implication of the Buddha's conception of truth... Experience, whether sensory or extraordinary, does not provide us with 'ready-made' truths... What is true is what has 'come to be', and what is false is what 'has not come to be' (*abhūta*)."

3 Mahātaṇhāsakhaya Sutta (M.38){I,265}, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Though aspects of insight emphasized by traditional meditation masters such as U Paṇḍita might differ slightly from certain American presentations, the fundamental description of *vipassanā* is remarkably constant between Burma and Barre. The Mahāsi Sayadaw gave a seminal account.

> Our method of meditation does not presuppose a thorough knowledge of *nāma-rūpa*, *anicca*, or other Buddhist concepts. For our main object is to attain insight-knowledge which is accessible only to empirical approach. Through experience, the yogi observes the distinction between mind and matter and he realizes the impermanence of every thing. Experience may be followed by explanation on the part of the teacher but not the other way round. For real knowledge has nothing to do with preconceived notions but is based on personal experience.[4]

4 Mahāsi 1986: 13. While the Mahāsi Sayadaw was quite an erudite scholar of the Pāḷi texts, neither he, nor his interpreters, nor most modern teachers of mindfulness meditation have studied Western Philosophy extensively. For this reason, many modern accounts in English of mindfulness practice and insight experience use vocabulary that may prove problematic given their usage in modern Philosophy. The idea of 'religious experience' for instance, has been the subject of a thorough deconstruction by Proudfoot 1985. This author acknowledges that "mystics judge their experiences to be revelatory, productive of insight into the true nature of reality, and not artifacts or projections of their own subjective mental states," but suggests that Western philosophers of religion might come up with better explanations. Indeed, Goldstein 1993c: 53, describes insight as "clearly, directly seeing and experiencing how things really are," comparing this to the way "you know that daffodils are yellow because you have seen them." Proudfoot could support his claim, 182, that "the noetic quality of sense perception and of mystical experience assumes a judgment about the proper explanation of that experience,"by pointing to metaphors such as Goldstein's daffodils, since according to both post-modernist thought and the Theravādin understanding, the conceptual category 'yellow' could not be an inherent characteristic of any sense experience.

Many teachers refer to the 'experience of insight'. In doing so, they seem to be using a definition of experience as sense awareness, and of insight as clear seeing of this process. The English word 'experience' can be used in two rather different ways, as Proudfoot points out, 229, though the one is likely a metaphoric extension of the other. "It can be used to refer to how something seems or appears to a person, without regard to the accuracy of that seeming or appearing... It can also be employed as an achievement word like *see* or *perceive*, where the judgment that someone has perceived

One cannot function as a human being without the equipment of culture, with only sensate 'knowing', as Clifford Geertz points out. Both he and the Buddha seem to have recognized human conceptions and views, *diṭṭhi*, as attempts to explain experience and thereby relieve the anxiety caused by the impingement of a fundamentally chaotic and inexplicable reality. Geertz does not employ the Theravādin idea of sense consciousness and clear seeing, though, so he might not admit the possibility offered by the Buddha: an escape from views. In any case, the two could agree at least that almost always, almost everyone clings desperately to one "explanatory apparatus" or another, terrified of the "tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*," that which Geertz calls "chaos."[5] To use an analogy from the Pāḷi, most of us prefer the dust in our eyes to seeing things as they are, inexplicably, inexpressibly painful.[6]

---

something assumes the belief that the object is there to be perceived and has entered into the cause of the perceptual experience in an appropriate way."

Presumably speaking for academic scholars of religion, Proudfoot asserts, 229-230, that "Religious experience, like any experience, must be specified from the subject's point of view. Were we to define religious experience by employing the second sense of the term and including an assumption of the independent existence of the object in the conditions for identifying an experience as religious, we would have to deny that Sarah Edwards has an experience of Jesus or that Stephen Bradley had an experience of the Holy Spirit unless we were prepared to accept the theological doctrines those experiences presuppose."

Since the category of 'religious' assumes a distinction between sacred and secular, it may not really be applicable to mindfulness practice, which focuses on any part of a 'world of experience'. Nonetheless, we are left with the problem of whether modern academics can responsibly define *vipassanā* in a way that assumes the existence of its objects independent of any intellectual interpretation. Proudfoot's objections may be relieved somewhat if we recall that the objects of insight are not 'God' nor even 'impermanence', but rather the processes of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, or thinking. I submit that even the 'scientific study of religion' may responsibly assume – indeed must assume for all practical purposes – that sense processes are evident as part of being human.

5 "Religion as a Cultural System," in Geertz 2000: 100.

6 Ayacana Sutta (S.VI.1){I,138}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

Satipaṭṭhāna, the establishment of mindfulness, is employed to gradually dispel delusion, revealing this existential chaos more and more fully. So terrifying is this reality that insight can only be integrated into a human life gradually, stage by stage.

> And just as the great ocean has a sequential deepening, a sequential slope, a sequential inclining, without a sudden drop off right [at first], in the same way in this Doctrine and Discipline there is a sequential training, a sequential working, a sequential progression, without a sudden penetration to full understanding right [at first].[7]

Perceptions Of Progress

In the "Discourse Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion," the Buddha describes how during his awakening "to me arose the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the clear sight, the illumination, in regard to things unheard before, 'this is the noble truth of suffering'."[8] There had been no tradition to instruct Siddhattha Gotama in the noble truths: of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering. Thus, the progressive stages of insight are not dependent on any teaching, but rather can occur in any sentient being's stream of consciousness when the mental factors of

7 Ud.V.5.{Ud.,53}, author's trans. Although Thanissaro's gloss 'gradual' captures one important aspect of *anupubbena*, I have used the 'successive' in order to bring out another aspect pointed out by the commentary{UdA,303}: the necessity of first purifying one's conduct in order to allow concentration to develop, cultivating concentration to protect the tender shoots of wisdom. The bracketed insertions, paraphrased from the commentary, help this apparently idiomatic phrase make more sense in translation.

8 Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta (S.LVI.11){V,422}, author's trans. Though I have used some up with slightly different glosses and structure in the first part of this sentence, I have followed Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation "in regard to things unheard before" for *pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu*; it captures a certain soft-spoken tone that Thanissaro Bhikkhu's "with regard to things never heard before" seems to overshoot.

mindfulness, investigation, courageous effort, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity are strong enough.[9]

Any sense experience can be insightful to whatever degree it occurs with clear seeing, *vijjā*. The requisite condition for awakening is simply this clear seeing, which can occur as a factor of any of the six kinds of sense consciousness. No particular sense experience is required for insight. In practice, nonetheless, concentrated mindfulness does bring about certain psycho-physical states; according to practitioners' reports, certain degrees of clear awareness seem to coincide with certain emotions. U Paṇḍita's description of the four insight absorptions gives one very broad picture of how concentration and insight progress.

> In the first vipassanā jhāna, one can experience the happiness of seclusion. The hindrances are kept away, and so the mind is remote and secluded from them.
>
> In the second jhāna, one experiences the happiness of concentration... in the form of rapture and comfort. As comfort is abandoned, the happiness of the third jhāna is simply known as the happiness of equanimity.
>
> Finally in the fourth jhāna, we experience the purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.
>
> The fourth type is the best happiness, of course. Like the first three, however, it still occurs in the realm of conditioned phenomena. Only if the yogi transcends this realm can he or she experience the ultimate happiness, the happiness of real peace. This is called *santisukha* in Pali. It occurs when the objects of meditation and all other mental and physical phenomena, as well as the noting mind itself, come to a complete stop.[10]

---

9 These seven 'Factors of Awakening' are bound to no particular conceptual content, but simply 'color' experience in certain ways, as do the opposing hindrances of craving, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. The presence of any one may trigger particular kinds of conceptual thought, of course. Please see the discussion on p.252.

10 Paṇḍita 1993: 204-5, is derived from a comparison made by the Mahasi Sayadaw between the mental factors that predominate at certain stages of absorption practice and of mindfulness practice.

By collating and systematizing descriptions from the Pāḷi texts, early Theravādin commentators developed lists of insight stages through which practitioners progress. These formulations are set out and elucidated in certain works by the Mahāsi Sayadaw and his senior students such as U Paṇḍita.

> As yogis practice vipassanā meditation under the instruction of a qualified teacher, they become able to perceive different truths about reality not accessible to ordinary consciousness. These meditation insights tend to occur in a specific order regardless of personality type or level of intelligence, successively deepening along with the concentration and purity of mind that result from proper meditation practice.[11]

In the Mahāsi system in Burma, when a teacher finds evidence in practitioners' reports suggesting that they have mastered and transcended the levels of insight absorption, the students listen to a taped description of the stages of insight. When she was exposed to the classical Theravādin analysis of the 'Progress of Insight', Michele McDonald, like many other practitioners, found it "the best description of what I had experienced."[12] Sharf cites the account of an illiterate farmer in southern Burma in the early twentieth century who diligently applied some brief meditation instructions he had received. He apparently made rapid progress: when scrutinized by Pāḷi scholars, his reports of how his experience had unfolded echoed the descriptions of progress through full awakening found in the Pāḷi discourses, though he had never had any direct access to these texts.[13]

Many American students seem to fixate on achieving progress, and thus develop an unbalanced kind of striving, which actually precludes the deepening of insight. Delusion is itself a defense mechanism, and there evidently are strong natural feedback mechanisms that hinder clear seeing when the faculties

11 Paṇḍita 1993: 269.

12 Personal communication.

13 Sharf 1995: 276, cites this story of the Sunlun Sayadaw, but I do wonder how this is meant to support Sharf's thesis.

of faith and wisdom, energy and concentration are out of balance. Without the support of each of the five faculties, including mindfulness, one would not be able to integrate an experience of existential chaos; when any of these factors is weak or absent, an experience of deep insight would result in insanity, not liberation from suffering. This is one proven danger in the use of LSD and other psychedelics to forcefully cut through layers of protective delusion. We should be thankful that insight progresses only when faith and wisdom, energy and concentration develop in tandem. In the "Urgent Discourse," the Buddha warns against impatience for results.

> There is the case where a farming householder quickly gets his field well-plowed & well-harrowed. Having quickly gotten his field well-plowed & well-harrowed, he quickly plants the seed. Having quickly planted the seed, he quickly lets in the water & then lets it out. These are the three urgent duties of a farming householder. Now, that farming householder does not have the power or might [to say:] 'May my crops spring up today, may the grains appear tomorrow, and may they ripen the next day.' But when the time has come, the farming householder's crops spring up, the grains appear, and they ripen.
>
> In the same way, there are these three urgent duties of a [bhikkhu]. Which three? The undertaking of heightened virtue, the undertaking of heightened mind, the undertaking of heightened discernment. These are the three urgent duties of a monk. Now, that [bhikkhu] does not have the power or might [to say:] 'May my mind be released from fermentations through lack of clinging... today or tomorrow or the next day.' But when the time has come, his mind is released from fermentations through lack of clinging...[14]

To avoid triggering unhealthy striving, and to foster the necessary balance, teachers use some presentations in the American context that differ from the linear account of progress

14 Accayika Sutta (A.III.91). Thanissaro Bhikkhu glosses *upadāna* as 'clinging/sustenance', which is linguistically accurate and also an interesting philosophical issue in the Pāḷi. However, in the interest of making the translation more accessible, I have omitted the second half of this construction.

usually employed in Burma. Steven Smith emphasizes that the practice progresses in cycles, and that practitioners should not be disappointed when they find previous concentration or insight no longer present. To encourage insight, rather than expectations and judgments about insight, novice practitioners in the Mahāsi tradition are not usually given more than a cursory outline of the stages of insight. The description of the progress of insight appended to U Paṇḍita's book *In This Very Life*

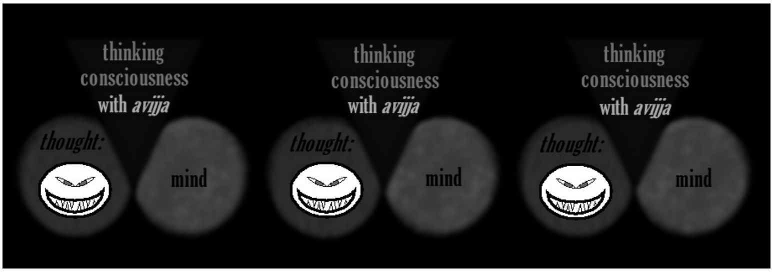
> is provided with a cautionary note: if you are practicing meditation, don't think about progress! It is quite impossible for even the most experienced meditator to evaluate his or her own practice; and only after extensive personal experience and training can a teacher begin to recognize the specific, subtle signs of this progression in the verbal reports of another meditator.[15]

A practitioner need not – indeed cannot – perceive insight as such immediately when it is occurring. Indeed, thinking that one is experiencing insight can preclude the experience of insight. When – for a moment – the illusion of continuity has been broken, phenomena are revealed to be rapidly, oppressively, uncontrollably arising and passing away. This genuine clarity, however, can be then become subject of a proliferating thought process in the very next moment. Because deep insight is itself so powerful and compelling, we very it offers a new opportunity for the mind's old tricks: taking the wisdom as 'mine', identifying oneself as wise, building a whole story about how I am progressing and what a wonderful thing I am doing with my life... When unnoticed, such reflections can "themselves become a hindrance to deepening insight."[16] *Vipassanā* is not intellectual analysis.

Any moment of consciousness includes a host of mental factors, according to the Theravādin analysis; the particular makeup is determined by past and present conditions. For the

---

15 Paṇḍita 1993: 269.
16 Goldstein 1993c: 53.



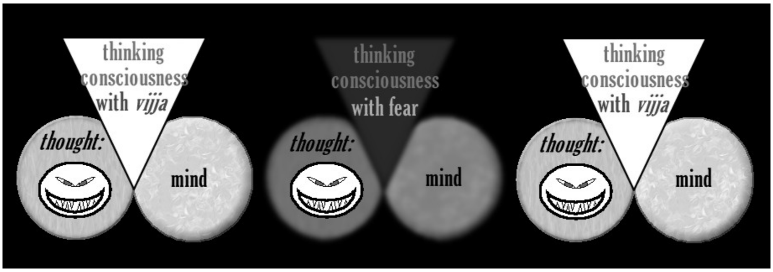
purpose of awakening, the presence or absence of healthy mental factors makes all the difference. The keystone of these liberating forces is *vijjā*, clear seeing on the level of sensation.[17] When its opposite, *avijjā*, is present instead, a cycle of suffering results. If the emphemeral, unsatisfying nature of a pleasant sense experience is not seen clearly, craving for more of it results. When a sense experience with a negative charge is not seen clearly, craving for the experience to end results, and *saṃsāra* rolls on. *Avijjā* has two aspects: not seeing what is actually happening, and seeing what is not actually happening.[18] When one is lost in a thought about something, the thought process itself is not seen; at such times distorted views of phenomena can occur. When a terrifying or pleasing thought about the future arises, we often mistake the content of our thought for reality: we are afraid of or covetous of something that is not even happening in the present. Such is *avijjā*, not seeing clearly.

The opposing quality of *vijjā* is a clear awareness of 'things as they are'. Clear 'seeing' does not imply someone or something that is seeing; "in the ultimate sense," the Venerable Nāgasena tells the Greek king Menander, "there exists no 'one who attains wisdom'."[19] Due to contact between sense base and sense object, sense consciousness arises. The clear awareness of *vijjā* is one of

17 Such clear seeing develops *paññā*, wisdom.

18 Adapted from Paṇḍita 1993: 281, "Not seeing what is true, that is, universal impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and absence of inherent essence or self; and seeing what is not true, namely that objects and experiences possess permanence, happiness and inherent self-essence."

19 Miln.V.6{Miln.,71}, author's trans.



many mental factors that occur in a stream of consciousness given certain past and present conditions.

Mental factors, such as craving or delusion, lovingkindness or clear seeing, do not depend on any particular concepts. Thinkers from the Greco-Judaic tradition might find it difficult to understand how there could be compassion or love, for instance, when notions of 'self' and 'other' have been dispelled. From the Theravādin perspective, however, there is no contradiction: unconditional love is a quality that can arise as part of any moment of sense consciousness. The most pure and intense moments of such love are not directed at any conceptual entity. Joseph Goldstein gives an illustrative description of the Bengali lady Dipa Ma Barua. Goldstein writes of a

> special quality of her being that touched everyone who met her. It was a quality of the quietest peace fully suffused with love. This stillness and love were different from anything I had encountered before. They were not an ego persona, and they didn't want or need anything in return. Simply, in the absence of self, love and peace were what remained.[20]

The clear seeing of *vijjā* is not a conceptual knowledge that might articulate ideas such as permanence or impermanence. Such interpretations can only occur as the content of a thought occurring at the mind-door. In that case, a moment of intellectual consciousness arises dependent on the intellect and a thought, which may or may not be accompanied by clear seeing of the thought process itself.

20 Goldstein 2003: 9.

Vijjā, then, is simply clear awareness of any sensation as it arises, as it is present, as it ceases. The idea that there are non-conceptual ways of knowing has been strongly asserted not only in Indian thought, but also by certain philosophers in the Western tradition. William James differentiates between 'knowledge about' and 'knowledge of acquaintance', the later corresponding quite closely to the Theravādin idea of knowing that directly confronts its object, *abhiññā*, without a conceptual component. No less an authority than D. J. Kalupahana has pointed to the many similarities between James' 'radical empiricism' and that of the Buddha in the Pāḷi.[21]

If we do allow for sense consciousness as described in the Pāḷi, a number of recent post-modernist claims about 'Buddhism' appear rather confused. Sharf refers approvingly to Robert Gimello's work, for instance.

> ...the discipline of meditation is designed to induce just those mystical experiences which will, when properly analysed, best exemplify basic Buddhist doctrines. Thus, rather than speak of Buddhist doctrines as interpretations of Buddhist mystical experiences, one might better speak of Buddhist mystical experiences as deliberately contrived exemplifications of Buddhist doctrine.[22]

Gimello goes even further in a later article, first arguing that mysticism is culturally contingent.

> The mysticism of any particular mystic is really the whole pattern of his life. The rare and wonderful 'peaks' of experience are a part of that pattern, but only a part, and their real value lies only in their relations to the other parts, to his thought, his moral values, his conduct towards others, his character and

21 Kalupahana 1979. Though Kalupahana's later readings of the Pāḷi texts on this issue, such as Kalupahana 1992, seem to reflect the influence of the post-modernist movement, this early article makes a strong and cogent case, 78, for "knowledge of things or events that are directly experienced." Please see note 39 on p.180.

22 Gimello 1978: 193.

> personality, etc. The modern study of mysticism has, I believe, tended to overlook those relations.[23]

Only irresponsible and incomplete interpretations of mindfulness meditation neglect the role that teachings and community play in guidance and inspiration, as Gimello suggests. Indeed, with a few important qualifications, one might fruitfully apply Gimello's description to practice in Burma or Barre.[24] The Eightfold Noble Path indeed must comprise the "whole pattern" of a person's life, including right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, as well as right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Most aspects of the practice are indeed culturally contingent, but Gimello's conclusion does not necessarily follow:

> ...we may say that acceptance of the dependency of mysticism upon its contexts, together with the entailed acceptance of the fundamental differences among varieties of mysticism, lends support to a view repugnant to many enthusiasts, viz. that mystical experience is simply the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values or of beliefs and values of other kinds which are held 'religiously'. But such a view of mystical experience should be disturbing only to those who set little store by religious beliefs and values.[25]

In order to arrive at an authentic interpretation of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, I have suggested throughout, practitioners and academics must return to the principles of the Pāḷi texts. I set no little store by the "beliefs and values" the Buddha presents in the discourses; on the contrary, the preceding chapters on "Conduct," "Learning," and "Discussion," detail how conceptual

23 Gimello 1983: 85.

24 If we agree that insight is "part of the pattern," the Pāḷi texts are quite clear that the greatest value of insight is its ability to bring an end to the painful cycle of existence. Given that, one wonders what exactly Gimello means by asserting that these experiences' "real value lies only in their relation" to human conduct, thought, values, etc. If he is simply assuming that no experience can have 'real value' except in relation to human society, then the argument is rather circular.

25 Gimello 1983: 85.

presentations of the Eightfold Noble Path by teachers such as the Mahāsi Sayadaw function to inspire and guide those of us who otherwise would not be able to accomplish awakening. However, these very same Theravādin doctrines make clear why the experience of insight is not "simply the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values." Certain mental factors can be inspired by various thoughts, according to the Theravādin analysis; only in this way can the teachings inspire qualities that might be identified as 'faith', 'energy', 'mindfulness', or 'concentration'. Like the clear seeing of *vijjā*, however, these factors do not depend on any particular teachings or ideas. This is not to deny that insight is dependent on context: any aspect of consciousness arises dependent on past and present interactions between sense organs and sense objects, but insight is not determined by the content of any sense object: visual, tangible, intellectual or otherwise. The necessary context for *vijjā*, then, is simply conscious being, not any particular set of concepts. In this way can we make sense of the idea that Siddhattha Gotama became awakened, a *buddha*, without any 'Buddhist doctrine' at his disposal. According to the Pāḷi texts, over the course of time there have been many beings who awakened without any instruction, both those who taught others to follow their practices, and those who did not.[26]

26 These are differentiated in the Pāḷi as *sammāsambuddhā* and *paccekabuddhā*, respectively, both distinct from the *sāvakā*, disciples who gain awakening after putting into practice the instructions of a *sammāsambuddha*. Some Western scholars, no doubt heavily influenced by the Hebrews' linear conception of history, have dismissed the idea of many buddhas as a later innovation foreign to the principles of the early Pāḷi texts. On the contrary, according to the ancient Indic understanding embedded throughout the Pāḷi, the process of history goes round and round and round again. The idea that any type of phenomenon could be limited to a single occurrence is a teleological conceit, which is why there is no *messiah* in the Pāḷi.

Undefining The Unconditioned

> 'This is the noble truth of suffering'...
> 'This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood'...
> 'This noble truth of suffering has been fully understood'.[27]

Even enjoyment, even equanimity, even consciousness itself is a subtle form of agitation. Progressing through the stages of insight means realizing this first noble truth of suffering on more and more subtle levels. In one passage, the Buddha gives the analogy of a massive fire, sustained by periodic inputs of "dried grass, dried cow dung, and dried timber," and burning perpetually.

> Even so, [bhikkhus], in one who keeps focusing on the allure of those phenomena that offer sustenance (lit: 'flammable phenomena'), craving develops; with craving as condition, sustenance; with sustenance as condition, becoming; with becoming as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging, illness & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all come into play. Thus is the origin of this entire mass of suffering & stress.[28]

Suffering arises only if craving is present; such is the second noble truth. This cause of suffering "is to be abandoned." Even a fire of "ten... twenty... thirty or forty cartloads of timber" would eventually go out if it were not fed, "its original sustenance being consumed, and no other being offered." Likewise for one who keeps seeing the drawbacks of arising experience: form, feeling, perception, mental states, andconsciousness, craving stops.[29]

> From the stopping of craving, sustenance stops. From the stopping of sustenance, becoming... birth... aging, illness and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair all stop. Thus is the stopping of this entire mass of suffering and stress.[30]

---

27 Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta (S.LVI.11){V,422}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.
28 S.XII.52{II,84}, trans. Thanissaro 1999: Part II, Ch. 3.
29 S.XII.52{II,85}, trans. Thanissaro 1999: Part II, Ch. 3.
30 S.XII.52{II,85}, trans. Thanissaro 1999: Part II, Ch. 3.

This cessation of suffering, the third noble truth, is to be "realized."[31] Descriptions and definitions of this goal differ not only between the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna, but also within the Theravāda between the Thai forest masters and the Burmese scholastic tradition, for instance. The Pāḷi texts themselves offer a number of different descriptions of full awakening, and also suggest that nothing would be adequate to convey the final purpose of the teachings. In the "Discourse on the Roots," the Buddha remarks that one would only conceive things about the goal because "he has not comprehended it, I tell you."[32] Despite this direct warning, over the course of the *Buddha-Sāsana*, more than a few have imputed ontological significance to descriptions of the destination, as Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out.

> There has long been – and still is – a common tendency to create a "Buddhist" metaphysics in which the experience of emptiness, the Unconditioned, the Dharma-body, Buddha-nature, rigpa, etc., is said to function as the ground of being from which the "All" – the entirety of our sensory & mental experience – is said to spring and to which we return when we meditate. Some people think that these theories are the inventions of scholars without any direct meditative experience, but actually they have most often originated among meditators, who label (or in the words of the [Mulapariyaya Sutta], "perceive") a particular meditative experience as the ultimate goal, identify with it in a subtle way (as when we are told that "we are the knowing"), and then view that level of experience as the ground of being out of which all other experience comes.[33]

In one passage, the Brahman Upasiva asks the Buddha to describe the end of the path "as this phenomenon has been known by you." The answer is instructive.

> One who has reached the end has no criterion
> by which anyone would say that –
>   for him it doesn't exist.

31 Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta (S.LVI.11){V,422}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

32 Mulapariyaya Sutta (M.1){I,4}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

33 Thanissaro 2001: Introduction.

When all phenomena are done away with
All means of speaking are done away with as well.[34]

The first statement indicates that the realization of the goal cannot be described either from the outside or from the inside, Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggests.[35] That is, the end of the practice offers no criteria by which anyone could determine it to have been known. Furthermore, "there would not even be any means of knowing whether or not there was a person having the experience. There would simply be the experience in and of itself."[36] If at 'the end' to be reached 'all phenomena are done away with', though, perhaps we should say that there would simply be the absence of experience.

In the subtle difference between Thanissaro Bhikkhu's description of an 'experience' which no one is known to have and my own reading of this sutta, as describing the absence of experience, lies one significant difference between our respective traditions. Any reality apart from the six senses "lies beyond range," as the Sabba Sutta puts it, and any assertion of another reality would be indefensible. Modern Burmese meditation masters in general have followed texts such as the "Discourse on Dependent Origination" in describing the goal as the "remainderless fading & cessation of... ignorance... volitional formations... consciousness... name-and-form... birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair."[37] In his discourse *On the Nature of Nibbāna*, the Mahāsi Sayadaw maintains that the goal "can be seen inwardly as the cessation of all phenomena."[38] The progress of insight clears the way for the noble path and fruition insights, which take this total cessation as their object. This is how practitioners come to know for themselves the unsurpassed happiness of peace. Nonetheless, by

34 Upasīva-māṇava-pucchā (Sn.V.6){Sn.,207} trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
35 Thanissaro 1999: Part II, Ch. 1.
36 Thanissaro 1999: Part II, Ch. 1.
37 Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta (S.XII.1){II,2}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.
38 Mahāsi 1992: 101.

this definition, *nibbāna* itself could not include an aspect of awareness, nor could it simply be a different way of relating to human experience, as certain Mahāyāna teachings define the goal. Some in the Thai forest tradition, on the other hand, describe a type of luminous, 'unfabricated' consciousness that remains when fabrications have ceased. Thanissaro Bhikkhu makes the crucial point.

> The standard description of nibbana after death is, "All that is sensed, not being relished, will grow cold right here." ...Again, as "all" is defined as the sense media, this raises the question as to whether consciousness without feature is not covered by this "all." However, AN IV.174 warns that any speculation as to whether anything does or doesn't remain after the remainderless stopping of the six sense media is to "complicate non-complication," which gets in the way of attaining the non-complicated. Thus this is a question that is best put aside.[39]

The last line of the Buddha's answer to Upasiva is an explicit claim to ineffability: "When all phenomena are done away with/ All means of speaking are done away with as well." As such, no terminology could truly apply to the goal. Inspiring descriptions such as "the foremost ease" and "the place of peace" are found in the Pāḷi.[40] Likewise, ancient and modern discourse on the practice refers to 'experience', 'realization', and 'attainment' of 'awakening', 'the deathless', or 'the unconditioned', among other epithets. The very existence of such a thing in relation to a fully awakened being is denied, however, in passages such as the verse answering Upasiva quoted above. This enigmatic stance suggests that any descriptions are intended as heuristic devices to orient those still on their way, rather than as definitive criteria for the destination.[41] In fact, states one passage, "there's no destination

39 In this note to his translation of D.11, Thanissaro Bhikkhu cites MN 140 and Iti 44 for the statement, "All that is sensed, not being relished..."

40 Māgaṇḍiya Sutta (M.75){I,508}, *paramaṃ sukhaṃ*, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu; Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "santipada," 676, referring to A.IV.26{II,18}.

41 Thanissaro 1999: Part I. Cf. Proudfoot 1985: 8, "Confusion arises... when language that is meant to function evocatively is also presented as analysis or as a theoretical account of religious experience."

to describe for those who are rightly released – having crossed over the flood of sensuality's bond – for those who have attained unwavering bliss."[42] If this only applies to those completely liberated from the cycle of suffering, though, for the rest of us there *is* a destination to work towards.

One means the Buddha apparently did use to convey his discovery was the metaphor of '*nibbāna*'. The primary meaning of the term *nibbāna*, and its Sanskrit cognate *nirvāṇa*, is the extinguishing of a fire. At the time of the Buddha, Indian thought postulated a form of sustenance, *upādāna*, which fire was thought to be dependent on and entrapped by. The fifth century C.E. commentator Buddhaghosa proposed a derivation for the term *nibbāna* from "*nir*," a negative particle, and "*vāṇa*," binding. Thanissaro Bhikkhu concurs and suggests that the translation "Unbinding" most accurately conveys the metaphorical sense originally intended by *nibbāna*.[43]

In one passage, the nun Dhammadinna, praised by the Buddha as "a woman of great discernment," answers a series of questions about the progression of the practice. Near the end of the series, she reports that "release lies on the other side of clear knowing." But when her student asks, "What lies on the other side of Unbinding?" she replies,

> You've gone too far, friend Visakha. You can't keep holding on up to the limit of questions. For the holy life plunges into Unbinding, culminates in Unbinding, has Unbinding as its final end.[44]

42 Dabba Sutta (Ud.VIII.10){Ud.,93}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Recognizing that "two antithetic readings are always possible (at least at the conventional level)," Faure 1994: 315, asks of the debate between the sudden and gradual schools of Zen "whether the practice actually results from a tension between the two poles of discourse, or whether the practice itself produces" this tension between opposing views. In the discourses of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, a similar dialectic functions both to represent the inconceivable linguistically, and to inspire the development of clear seeing which transcends conceptions.

43 Thanissaro 1999: Part I.

Through watching the arising and passing of each moment of experience, more and more precisely, a practitioner finally comes to realize its total cessation. This awakening can happen through seeing the cessation of any experience whatsoever. A teacher can verify that the course of insight absorptions has been completed, and may have a strong suspicion that a practitioner has realized *nibbāna* if certain after-effects are evident. Given the disparity between descriptions of realization offered by the Mahāsi Sayadaw, the Thai Forest masters, and others, some modern teachers have been unsure of which definition to use when ascertaining the state of their students' practice. This should only be a problem, however, if we are not willing to consistently operate from one particular school's coherent set of interpretive principles, respecting rather than minimizing the diversity of teachings available and the results they bring. In any case, according the Pāḷi, only a *sammāsambuddha* such as such as the Sakyamuni can verify another person's attainment. For all practical purposes at this point in history, then, no external observer can be sure. This is why practitioners in the Mahāsi system in Burma listen to a tape with descriptions of the experiences encountered along progress of insight, and then decide for themselves. Sayadaw U Paṇḍita simply asks, "are you satisfied with your practice?"[45] It is possible for practitioners to be mistaken, of course, either under- or over-estimating their own attainments. The proof of any particular realization is whether the respective unskillful qualities of mind do or do not

44 Cula-Vedalla Sutta (M.44){I,304}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Dhammadina's student in this case, we learn elsewhere, is her former husband Visakha, himself quite highly attained. Dhammadina encourages him to check her answer with the Buddha, who makes clear his total agreement. "Dhammadinna the nun is wise, Visakha, a woman of great discernment. If you had asked me those things, I would have answered you in the same way she did. That is the meaning of those things. That is how you should remember it."

45 Michele McDonald suggests that the qualities of a 'saint' only really become strongly apparent in people who have reached the third stage of awakening, *anāgāmi*. Personal communication, October 2002.

continue arising; that is, the confirmation is how awakening is manifested in a human life.[46] This is reflected in American presentations of *vipassanā* practice, which do not refer nearly as frequently as the talks given by Burmese monks to discrete realizations of the Unconditioned or the Unbinding. Rather, teachers at IMS seem to put much more emphasis on 'liberation' or 'freedom' from suffering.[47]

If for all practical purposes realization cannot be verified from outside a world of experience, academic researchers need not speculate about it. The criteria by which one can be sure of the goal, the testimony of trusted friends, is not generally accepted as solid evidence for the 'scientific' study of religion. Intellectual reasoning is neither the only nor necessarily the most valuable way of knowing, however. For a practitioner of the Eightfold Noble Path, initiative trust in the practice and its goal come from having 'good friends'.

> Those who have not known, seen, penetrated, realized, or attained it by means of discernment would have to take it on conviction in others that the faculty of conviction... persistence... mindfulness... concentration... discernment, when developed and pursued, plunges into the Deathless, has the Deathless as its goal and consummation; whereas those who have known, seen, penetrated, realized, and attained it by means of discernment would have no doubt or uncertainty that the faculty of conviction... persistence... mindfulness... concentration... discernment, when developed and pursued, plunges into the Deathless, has the Deathless as its goal and consummation.[48]

If academics cannot conclude that there is a particular experiential referent of *nibbāna*, neither can they responsibly assert that there is not. Sharf points to a number of disputes between various traditions about the practice and its goal, concluding on this basis that

46 Cf. M.105.

47 Prebish 1999: 157-8, notes this usage.

48 Pubbakotthaka Sutta (S.XLVIII.44){V,221}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

> in the case of contemporary *vipassanā* and Zen, historical, ethnographic, and philosophical analysis belies the notion that the rhetoric of experience functions ostensively to refer to discrete, identifiable, and replicable "states of consciousness."[49]

One Pāḷi discourse seems to have anticipated Sharf's challenge, offering a rebuttal to his related contention that since different people give different descriptions, there is no discrete referent of the term *nibbāna*. Moreover, by its very existence, this text belies Sharf's suggestion that the modern Vipassanā movement's emphasis on direct experience of such realizations has no substantial basis in the early Buddha-Sāsana. The discourse in question uses the analogy of a particular species of Indian tree literally named 'what is it?' because of its drastic changes between the seasons.

> A certain monk went to another monk and, on arrival, said to him, "To what extent, my friend, is a monk's vision said to be well-purified?"
>
> "When a monk discerns, as it actually is, the origination & passing away of the six media of sensory contact, my friend, it is to that extent that his vision is said to be well-purified."
>
> The first monk, dissatisfied with the other monk's answer to his question, went to still another monk and, on arrival, said to him, "To what extent, my friend, is a monk's vision said to be well-purified?"
>
> "When a monk discerns, as it actually is, the origination & passing away of the five clinging-aggregates..."
>
> "...the origination & passing away of the four great elements [earth, water, wind, & fire]..."
>
> "...that whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation, my friend, it is to that extent that his vision is said to be well-purified."
>
> The first monk, dissatisfied with this monk's answer to his question, then went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he [reported to the Blessed One his conversations with the other monks. The Blessed One then said:]

49 Sharf 1995: 233.

> "Monk, it's as if there were a man who had never seen a riddle tree. He would go to another man who had seen one and, on arrival, would say to him, 'What, my good man, is a riddle tree like?'
>
> The other would say, 'A riddle tree is black, my good man, like a burnt stump.' For at the time he saw it, that's what the riddle tree was like.
>
> Then the first man, dissatisfied with the other man's answer, went to still another man who had seen a riddle tree and, on arrival, said to him, 'What, my good man, is a riddle tree like?'
>
> The other would say, 'A riddle tree is red, my good man, like a lump of meat.'...
>
> 'A riddle tree is stripped of its bark, my good man, and has burst pods, like an acacia tree.'...
>
> 'A riddle tree has thick foliage, my good man, and gives a dense shade, like a banyan.' For at the time he saw it, that's what the riddle tree was like.
>
> In the same way, monk, however those intelligent men of integrity were focused when their vision became well purified is the way in which they answered."[50]

According to this discourse, at least, *nibbāna* is discrete; different people directly know the same realization, though their personal histories determine their conceptual interpretations of it. Though the process of sense experience is totally unbound in the eternal present, the preceding practice of dispelling delusion and the subsequent reintegration into one's world of experience are very much human enterprises. Thus, the fourth and final noble truth is of "the way of practice leading to the cessation" of suffering, which "is to be developed."[51] Having directly known

50 Kiṃsuka Sutta (S.XXXV.245){IV,191ff}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. See also Bhikkhu Bodhi's notes on page 1427 of his *Saṁyutta Nikāya* translation, "*Kiṃsuka* literally means 'what's it?' The name may have originated from an ancient Indian folk riddle."

51 Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta (S.LVI.11){V,422}. Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation of *paṭipada*, in this verse, as "way of practice," seems to capture more connotations of the original Pāḷi than the more standard "way," which Bhikkhu Bodhi uses.

and realized the goal for themselves in the present, practitioners continue entering and dwelling in it.[52]

'Engaged' 'Buddhism'

How is insight manifested in a human life today? What might one who has realized the import of the Buddha's teachings in the Pāḷi offer to help ease the afflictions of the modern world?

> The most valuable contribution that the Buddha's teaching can make to helping us resolve the great dilemmas facing us today is twofold: first, its uncompromisingly realistic analysis of the psychological springs of human suffering, and second, the ethically ennobling discipline it proposes as the solution.[53]

Bhikkhu Bodhi offers two aspects of wisdom as balms for suffering. These two are none other than the means and the results of *vipassanā*: the development of skillful conduct, concentration of mind, and transformative understanding reveals and dispels the reactive mechanisms that lead us to cause ourselves and others suffering over and over.

The Theravāda's focus on curing suffering in an individual 'world of experience' is radical in the Western context. The Greco-Judaic tradition has put great emphasis on action that improves society, whereas Indian thought has concentrated on individual development. Texts such as the *Psalms of Solomon* describe how the *messiah* "shall defeat the great powers of the world, liberate his people from foreign rule, and establish a universal kingdom in which the people will live in peace and happiness."[54] Perhaps this type of ideal has driven modern efforts to portray the Buddha as a social reformer.[55]

---

52 Iti.103{Iti.,105}.

53 Bodhi 1996.

54 Ringgren 1987: 470, referring to Solomon 17-18.

55 While it is true that the renunciate community the Buddha founded did not discriminate on the basis of class, for instance, he does not appear to have

Given our Greco-Judaic heritage, it should come as no surprise that in America, as Joseph Goldstein remarks,

> we often practice the dharma in service of human values... Perhaps because many people haven't met teachers who have completely realized the truth, teachers who might inspire them to something greater, more transcendental.[56]

Sayadaw U Paṇḍita has inspired many to practice *Dhamma-Vinaya* as a means to a 'high standard of living', but he uses this expression metaphorically, to refer to the purity of people's actions, speech, and thought.[57] According to the Pāḷi texts, as well, the Eightfold Noble Path is to be engaged with the 'world' of an individual's experience. Recall that from the Theravādin perspective, the process of sensation can be directly known, but an external world cannot.

Thoughts can link and group memories of past sense experience, but any particular thought arises and passes in a moment. Thus, according to the Pāḷi texts, 'I' and 'you', 'social injustice' and the 'world', 'spirituality' and 'liberation', are ideas which happen in a moment, then pass completely away. In the "Discourse on the All," quoted above, the Buddha points out that knowledge of any thing apart from sense experience could only be inferred, never direct.[58] This is why the direct knowledge of reality that brings liberation from suffering cannot be achieved by attention to the world of personalities and organisms and trees and such.

---

made a concerted effort to change this practice in the larger society, according to Chakravarti 1987: 94ff.

56 Goldstein 1993a: 17.

57 "ဘဝတန်း မြင့် ပေးတယ်," E.g. in Paṇḍita 1994: 37, "If you want a high standard of life, practise the Buddha's Teachings. If you want a high standard of life as a person cultured in speech and action, practise Morality. If you want a high standard of life as a person cultured in mind, practise Concentration (meditation). If you want a high standard of life as a person developed in mind and advanced in insight knowledge, practise (*Vipassanā*) Insight (meditation)."

58 Please see p.179.

Various Greco-Judaic thinkers, viewing a single human being as just one small part of a much larger world, have seen traditions that prioritize mental purification as disengaged, if not selfish. From the Theravādin perspective, the cause of suffering is mental and so is the cure; human beings can improve their world only by eradicating their own greed, ill-will, and delusion, and by encouraging others to do so. Belying Western characterizations of the Theravāda as selfish, one discourse criticizes those who practice for their own benefit but not that of others, praising one who practices to benefit both.[59] As another discussion with a student makes clear, though, the Buddha values a very particular way of benefiting others: encouraging and enabling others' practice of the Eightfold Noble Path.

> "And to what extent, venerable sir, is one a lay follower who practices both for his own benefit & the benefit of others?"
>
> "Jivaka, when a lay follower himself is consummate in conviction and encourages others in the consummation of conviction; when he himself is consummate in virtue and encourages others in the consummation of virtue; when he himself is consummate in generosity and encourages others in the consummation of generosity; when he himself desires to see the monks and encourages others to see the monks; when he himself wants to hear the true Dhamma and encourages others to hear the true Dhamma; when he himself habitually remembers the Dhamma he has heard and encourages others to remember the Dhamma they have heard; when he himself explores the meaning of the Dhamma he has heard and encourages others to explore the meaning of the Dhamma they have heard; when he himself, knowing both the Dhamma & its meaning, practices the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma and encourages others to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma: then to that extent he is a lay

---

59 Dhammaññu Sutta (A.VII.64){IV,116}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Of two people who practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, having a sense of Dhamma, having a sense of meaning – one who practices for both his own benefit and that of others, and one who practices for his own benefit but not that of others – the one who practices for his own benefit but not that of others is to be criticized for that reason, the one who practices for both his own benefit and that of others is, for that reason, to be praised."

> follower who practices both for his own benefit and for the benefit of others."[60]

The reasoning behind this definition of benefiting others follows directly from the basic principles of the Pāḷi. However, 'Buddhist' vocabulary is sometimes employed in a framework of values that belong much more to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In recent years, for instance, there has been movement towards an ecumenical 'Buddhism' that defines itself as 'Engaged' with social and environmental issues. Some have justified this focus by referring to doctrines from the texts such as 'skillful conduct' and 'inter-dependence'. Given their native philosophical frameworks, though, the connections between some of the textual doctrines cited and the social activism advocated are quite tenuous. Alan Sponberg gives an incisive critique of recent attempts by authors such as Joanna Macy to apply the 'Buddhist' idea of interrelatedness to ecological communities while dismissing the importance of developing skillful conduct, concentration, and wisdom.

> Western ecology has given us an adequate model for understanding the ethical implications of how all things are interrelated. It is nice that Buddhism confirms that insight, but we gain little from Buddhism if that is all we see in the tradition. And we gain even less if we feel that simply affirming this view of interrelatedness will, of itself, be sufficient to bring about the necessary changes in our ethical practice. Thus the real value of Buddhism for us today lies not so much in its clear articulation of interrelatedness as in its other crucial dimension, in its conception of the ethical life as a path of practice coupled with practical techniques for actually cultivating compassionate activity.[61]

---

60 Jivaka Sutta (A.VIII.26){IV,226}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Warder 2000: 153, finds this same principle at work in the Buddha's choice to spend much of his time in or near populated areas, "There is a general underlying assumption that beyond the immediate aim of individual peace of mind, <u>or more probably in essential connection with it</u>, lies the objective of the happiness of the whole human society and the still higher objective of the happiness of all living beings." My emphasis.

61 Sponberg 1997: 373-4.

The Pāḷi provides many good reasons for developing just and sustainable relationships with other beings, but the engagement is with the practitioner's own stream of consciousness. Though skillfully motivated actions are much more likely to have positive results in society, often they do have some unintended and unhappy consequences. Compassionate action is skillful because it cultivates the practitioner's compassion; the purity is in the intention rather than in the result.[62] Orchestrating even a moment of total harmony just between the human beings on Earth would be impossibly complicated; *nibbāna* is 'non-complication': in the absence of delusion, the whole cycle of suffering simply does not arise.[63] Such liberation is possible, but only within that 'world' that can be directly known: present sensation.

The *Buddha-Dhamma* is radical. The fact that these teachings of awakening challenge commonly accepted views – in contemporary Western society as in ancient India – is precisely the reason that they are so transformative. Some of the principles of the Theravādin tradition that are least comfortable for Americans early in their practice, those teachings that do not fit into our own frameworks of Science or Psychology or spirituality, may have the most to offer. Indeed, Sponberg advocates faithfulness to the source for much the same reasons that I have throughout *Strong Roots*.

> There are thus two reasons why reaffirming the vertical dimension of Buddhism [i.e. progressive development of morality, concentration, and wisdom] is so important: first, because it is central to the integrity of the tradition; and, second, because it is precisely that part of the tradition that has something useful to add to contemporary environmental ethics...[64]

62 I am indebted here to a discussion with Michele McDonald, October 2002.

63 '*appapañco*', as at A.IV.174{II,161}. Please see also M.18.

64 Sponberg 1997: 372.

A tradition is defined by the approach taken and the goal aimed at, not the words used. Selecting concepts and practices from the Pāḷi based on the values and methods of the European Enlightenment or orienting practitioners of *satipaṭṭhāna* towards Greco-Judaic ideals of spirituality might lead people towards the respective goals of those Western traditions. It could not produce a successful tradition of awakening, an authentic *Buddha-Sāsana*. The teachings of the Pāḷi texts are most effective at achieving their own stated goal, and do it best within in their own philosophical framework. From this perspective, using the 'spirit and the letter' of the teachings to guide oneself and others through the depths of insight – and beyond – is the most beneficially 'Engaged' 'Buddhism'.

Coming Full Cycle

Where have we been, and where do we go from here? How can we define the source for teaching and practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*? Is anyone interested in a rooted approach to *Dhamma*?

In examining "Deep Transmission," I offered some analytical tools for understanding the connection between the Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha in Burma and the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. The Pāḷi texts' analysis of dependent co-arising suggests a way to understand both how different human cultures define the '*Dhamma-Vinaya*' and how this 'Doctrine and Discipline' shapes a person. I have employed the work of George Steiner, as well as the Buddha's discourses, to outline how meaning is interpreted from one individual to another, or from one culture to another. Many, many individual decisions about how to get the meaning of the teachings across accumulate over time and come to define the terms and the character of a particular tradition of awakening, a *Buddha-Sāsana*. This is why I have suggested that anyone trying to understand the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice laid out in the Pāḷi, as a scholar, practitioner, or teacher, can benefit from studying the interpretive principles offered in the discourses.

Sayadaw U Paṇḍita gave me some wise guidance when I told him about this project in cross-cultural understanding of the practice. "Just show the *saddhamma*," he said, the teachings that are true across human contexts. I have tried to use the comparison between practice in Burma and in Barre to highlight some principles than prove applicable in both cultures: (1) A number of teachers, ancient and modern, were cited in the chapter on "Skillful Conduct," relating how they found moral restraint necessary for the 'freedom from remorse' that allows the mind to settle and become purified. (2) Certain understandings are more conducive than others to the 'higher escape from views' according to the Buddha's discourses in the Pāḷi; the exploration in "Learning" suggested the value of balancing theoretical study and practical application of the teachings. (3) Balance between the faculties of wisdom and faith, as well as between energy and concentration, is crucial for practice in both Burma and Barre; the role of a meditation teacher is to nuture this equipoise. (4) Effective establishment of mindfulness depends on both the protection and tranquility of concentrated attention (*samatha*) and the radical challenge posed by clear seeing of 'things as they are' (*vipassanā*). (5) The Pāḷi texts advocate direct knowing of sensation to see its true characteristics, as detailed in the final chapter on "Insight," yet allow for the fact that such direct knowing is interpreted into language and culture in many disparate ways. Perhaps one principle emerges overall: of balancing between extremes, of following a middle way: *majjhima paṭipadā.*

A Living Vision

The philosophical framework of the Pāḷi logically ties together the many aspects of the Doctrine and the Discipline into a coherent and pragmatic system. Returning to its principles

gives mindfulness practitioners a living connection to our spiritual heritage and connects us to the world of life around us. Those who employ the understandings advocated in the discourses gain a powerful inspiration and balancing force for practice.

Since there is no ultimate authority to determine what is 'good', from the perspective of the Pāḷi texts, no particular path is 'better' than any other; they just lead in different directions. The Buddha's guidance in the discourses is intended for a single purpose: the cessation of suffering. He leaves the solution of other problems up to other teachings. The principles of the Pāḷi tie together to form a philosophical framework that can guide people in any time or culture, and yet guide us away from absolutism and intolerance. If we are truly willing to understand different traditions on their own terms, if we allow them to define their own respective goals, there is no reason for Buddhists to be intolerant of other religions.

> ...non-Buddhist systems will not be able to lead their adherents to the final goal of the Buddha's Dhamma, but they never proposed to do that in the first place. For Buddhism, acceptance of the idea of the beginningless round of rebirths implies that it would be utterly unrealistic to expect more than a small number of people to be drawn towards a spiritual path aimed at complete liberation.[1]

Bhikkhu Bodhi thus illustrates one very pragmatic value of the Theravādin understanding of living and dying as a continuous cycle.

Much of the value of the Theravāda's philosophical framework lies in its broad perspective: understanding a human life as a precious opportunity in the infinite cycle of living and dying, among the vast numbers of suffering beings. If we follow the Theravādin explanation of consciousness to its logical conclusions, it can open up for us the realm of the Pāḷi. This a world filled with nuns and monks practicing ardent meditation to

1 Bodhi 1993.

end the cycle of suffering, but also a universe alive with tree spirits, celestial beings, and ghosts, each with their own history of skillful and unskillful action, some with their own commitment to liberation and hindrances to practice.

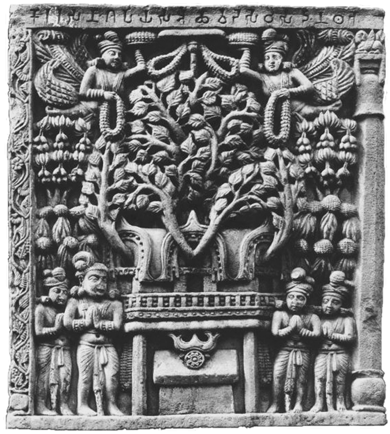
Many Americans would dismiss such a perspective out of hand. This is a great loss. For one, the modern Western perspective has made inanimate – killed, at least in our minds – much of the universe that our ancestors saw as alive. The danger of such an exclusively secular viewpoint is increasingly apparent in the way human beings are literally killing our planetary community. We can reclaim a holistic understanding of life – for pragmatic reasons of reducing suffering alone – by returning to the perspective offered in the Pāḷi.

The intensive mindfulness practice taught at IMS has been framed in this holistic context for thousands of years. The relief on the cover of *Strong Roots* has philosophical as well as historical significance for the tradition of the Mahāsi Sayadaw. In the carved image, we find not only four human worshipers, but also two *devas* (at top), spirit beings paying their respects to the Buddha's awakening. The image is from the southern pillar of the Eastern Gateway at the Sañcī Stupa in north-central India. On the back of this gateway are images of various animals and gods, all gathered for the purpose of showing their gratitude and respect for the Awakened One. Other panels depict historical scenes of the Buddha's life and of King Asoka's homage to the *Dhamma*.[2] The inscription above the image marks the pillar as the donation of one Nāgapiya Acchavāda, a prominent citizen of nearby Kurara.[3] This practice of acknowledging donors, continued today

2 Fergusson 1971: 109.

3 I read "*Korarasa Nāgapiyasa Acchavādaseṭhīsa dā(ṃ)na-thabho.*" Asokan Brahmi script differs from modern Pāḷi scripts in the use of a single consonant instead of, for instance, a double 's' to mark the genetive case of the name, or in the single 'ṭh' in *seṭṭhi*. Thus, "the pillar gift of 'Beloved of the Devas', 'the Clear-speaker' Citizen/Merchant, of Korara (=Kurara).

in Burma, offers an opportunity for gratitude, for 'knowing what was done' – even after thousands of years.



In the scenes depicted on the Sañcī pillars, there is no image of the Sakyamuni himself. One 'thus gone', a *Tathāgata*, is described in the "Bāhuna Sutta" as dwelling "freed, dissociated, and released from form... feeling... perception... processes... consciousness... birth... aging... death... stress... defilement."[4] After the Buddha's death and *parinibbāna*, as traditions of veneration developed around him and his teachings, artists faced the challenge of conceiving visually one freed from form and all other conditioned phenomena. To solve the problem of representing the inconceivable, the early followers of the Buddha's teachings turned to metaphor. Until the rise of the Mahāyāna movement(s) in the first centuries of the Common Era, Indian artists represented the Buddha almost exclusively through the use of symbols, rather than images of a human body.[5] The commencement of the Buddha's teaching career with the "Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta," the 'Discourse Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion', came to be identified with the image of a wheel. An elaborate burial mound, the *stūpa* (Pāḷi *thūpa*), was used to represent the Buddha's final unbinding, the *parinibbāna*. The type of fig tree at whose foot Siddhattha Gotama sat down to practice for full awakening, *aśvattha* (pāpal tree, *Ficus religiosa*), was adopted as a symbol for victory over the forces of delusion. The Sañcī pillar image on the cover of *Strong Roots* centers on a vibrant example of this same species, still referred to as the *bodhi* tree, 'the tree of awakening'.

4 Vāhana (Bāhuna) Sutta (A.X.81){V,152}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

5 Seckel 1964: 152.

The metaphor is apt. In many instances, some quoted above, the discourses of the Pāḷi use the image of a tree to symbolize growth and accomplishment in the practice.[6] Bhikkhu Bodhi employs this same metaphor in *Nourishing the Roots* to describe how the seed of faith must develop strong roots of skillful conduct and a solid and stable trunk of concentration to sustain the branches of wisdom "which yield the flowers of enlightenment and the fruits of deliverance."

> The vigour of the spiritual life, like the vigour of a tree, depends upon healthy roots. Just as a tree with weak and shallow roots cannot flourish but will grow up stunted, withered and barren, so a spiritual life devoid of strong roots will also have a stunted growth incapable of bearing fruit. To attempt to scale the higher stages of the path it is essential at the outset to nourish the proper roots of the path; otherwise the result will be frustration, disillusionment, and perhaps even danger. The roots of the path are the constituents of *sīla,* the factors of moral virtue. These are

---

6 Cook 1988: 22, writes that "The Tree, with its spreading subterranean roots, narrow trunk and spreading foliage, is a perfect image for the actual process of enlightenment: for the raising, channeling and concentration of the latent energies required for spiritual transformation." Trees are indeed used in this metaphorical sense in the Pāḷi. Just as "a massive tree whose branches carry fruits and leaves, with trunks and roots and an abundance of fruits" is a "haven for birds from all around," states the Saddhā Sutta, so, too, "the person consummate in virtue and conviction, humble, sensitive, gentle, delightful, and mild" is a "haven for many people: monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers," A.V.38, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Sn.II.1, trans. Thanissaro, contains another analogy: "like a forest grove with flowering tops in the first month of the heat of the summer, so is the foremost Dhamma [the Buddha] taught, for the highest benefit, leading to Unbinding."

The term used in the Pāḷi texts to refer to the practice of meditation or mental culture, *bhāvanā*, is derived from a root meaning of increase, cultivation, production, and development. At Sn.I.4, trans. Thanissaro, the Buddha gives a metaphor for the practice of mental culture accessible to the farmer Kasī Bhāradvāja. "Conviction is my seed," explains the Awakened One, "austerity my rain, discernment my yoke and plow, conscience my pole, mind my yoke-tie, mindfulness my plowshare and goad, ...persistence, my beast of burden." "I make truth a weeding-hook, and composure my unyoking." This cultivation "has as its fruit the deathless. Having plowed this plowing one is unyoked from all suffering and stress."

the basis for meditation, the ground for all wisdom and higher achievement.[7]

The roots of *Dhamma-Vinaya* transmission between people, or between cultures, are the components of the *Sāsana*: theoretical study, practical application, and personal realization of the teachings for awakening. The principles implicit and explicit in the traditional sources are the genetic code for deep transmission, the ground for wise guidance and higher achievement. Here as well, strong roots result in sweet fruit.



Sañcī Stupa, Madhya Pradesh, India
(Established 1st-2nd century BCE).

Emperor Asoka built the Sañcī Stupa in the third century B.C.E. on a hill near Vedisa, in central India. The missionaries who brought the *Sāsana* south to the island of Laṅka, Asoka's son Mahinda Thera and his daughter Saṅghamittā Therī, are said to have been born in Vedisa, ordained together, and both reached fulfillment in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*: full awakening.[8] At the

7 Bodhi 1990.

8 Please see the discussion on p.48.

time, this area was a stronghold of the early conservative tradition that gave rise to the Theravāda, and the teachings were to thrive there for over a thousand years. The first mission to Laṅka set out from the Sañcī Stupa, and the Theravāda tradition of mindfulness thus passed directly through this spot on its way east to the land of the Burmans. There the tradition was kept alive for at least another thousand years, from the period of King Anawratha until modern times. How long will it last in North America?

The Tree Of Awakening In 'The Land Of The Free'

The cumulative tradition of mindfulness practice that the Mahāsi Sayadaw transmitted, this lineage of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sāsana*, has begun to take root in the soil of the United States. When the seeds of confidence were sown in the 1960s and 70s, nothing much substantial moved from Burma to Barre: no great migrations of people, no massive importation of texts or images or robes. Rather, much as the genes encoded in a seed interact with environmental conditions, using the energy of the sun to transform soil and water into an entirely new tree, so too Theravādin principles of understanding have employed the light of *Dhamma* to transform American practitioners and American society. This particular tree of awakening is young and vulnerable, but also vibrant. Senior American practitioners have brought forth leaves of wisdom in the form of numerous books, articles, and various programs in schools, hospitals, and corporations. As this new manifestation of the *Sāsana* develops, its roots extend further and further into the native literature, economy, and politics, seeking fertile pockets in the society. Extending the potential of the Buddha's teachings in the Pāḷi benefits many people, for the tree of awakening is a nitrogen-fixer, to boot. As more and more individuals cultivate purity of

conduct, serenity of mind, and deep understanding, the overall health of the society and its complex web of inter-cultural interactions are enhanced. These developments, in turn, create the conditions for further growth, both at home and abroad.

American interpreters of mindfulness meditation have excelled at finding new applications and new potential, fulfilling one aspect of the authentic completion advocated by Steiner. On the whole, however, we have yet to really fulfill Steiner's second prescription, to make "the autonomous virtues of the original more precisely visible," to direct inquiry past the interpreters' own capabilities into the depths of the tradition.[9] Such a movement would bring out the holistic approach of the Pāḷi, emphasizing the first five factors of the Eightfold Noble Path – right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, and right livelihood – as well as the last three: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Western renditions have so focused on meditation that other vital aspects of the teaching have been neglected, and the full benefit of the tradition has not been realized. Gil Fronsdal's comments are revealing.

> As the number of people participating in the mindfulness practices of Insight Meditation has increased, a loose-knit lay Buddhist movement, uniquely Western, that is sometimes known as the "*vipassanā* movement," has evolved. With minimal remaining connection to Theravāda Buddhism, the movement speaks of "*vipassanā* students and teachers," *vipassanā* centers and communities," and even a national "*vipassanā* journal." As a result, many more Americans of European descent refer to themselves as *vipassanā* students than as students of Theravāda Buddhism.[10]

Rooting the teachings of mindfulness in contemporary American values may result in more people getting started, but in order to be fully effective the teachings must also be firmly rooted in the organizing principles of the Pāḷi, the source of the living Theravādin tradition. "This is such an important point,"

9 Steiner 1998: 318.
10 Fronsdal 1998: 164.

comments Rebecca Bradshaw, a participant in the recently established teacher-training program at IMS.

> One thing I find positive is that in our teacher training they are wanting us to get thoroughly grounded in the Theravada tradition and in the texts, in order to prevent a poor translation of the practice (obviously, our personal practice is quite important too!).[11]

To my mind, modern renderings of ancient teachings that do not convey the power of the native framework, interpretations that do not exhibit and encourage a connection with their heritage, are disrespectful not only to the traditions involved but also to the audience present and future, to those who might have been able to surpass the interpreter in absorbing the original profundity, who might have been able to send roots deeper into the source.

To be rooted in a tradition, we must have some working definition of our source. If the meaning of a text is defined by the human context, the question is not whether various teachings use the same vocabulary to refer to the goal(s). Language does not reach the realm of direct knowing, so 'freedom' could refer to a slightly different thing in the context of the Vajrayāna than in the Theravāda, just as it is given a very different meaning in the American national anthem, "And does that star-spangled banner yet wave/ O'er the land of the free/ And the home of the brave."

The crucial subject for debate is the degree of coherence between the interpretive principles of different traditions. The decision to include Psychoanalysis or *Satipaṭṭhāna* as part of the transmission of Dzogchen, for instance, would require a careful examination of the degree of compatibility between the hermeneutic frameworks in which each of these practices currently operate. One discourse from the Pāḷi offers a principle to help practitioners today determine which practices and teachings, ancient or modern, are viable as part of a Theravādin tradition: those which 'stand with the Suttas' and 'tally with the

11 Rebecca Bradshaw, personal communication, October 2002.

Vinaya'.[12] I read this to mean that any particular interpretation must stand not just with one or two texts but rather must accord with the principles evident throughout the Pāḷi in the books of Discipline and in discourse after discourse after discourse. Discussions using this approach would examine proposed adaptations from a coherent set interpretive principles, a particular definition of a goal and the best means to achieve it. They would focus on the implications of new developments for the internal coherence of a particular transmission, its consistency with the cumulative tradition, and the effectiveness of these new elements at achieving the goals defined by the established texts. Indeed, this is the most fruitful direction I see for further debate.

Understanding that the meaning of a symbol is dependent on its context allows us to genuinely respect diversity. The Buddha of the Lotus Sutra says very different things than the Buddha of the Pāḷi Nikāya texts. If we insist that these refer to the same person, we make the Buddha as an individual, and Buddhism as a tradition, appear rather confused and self-contradictory. Rather than debating unprovable historical claims about what 'the Buddha' actually said, we can recognize that what we have today are texts and living traditions. If two or more contemporary teachings operate on substantially different interpretive principles, it seems much more respectful to think of them as

12 "There is the case where a bhikkhu says this: 'In the Blessed One's presence have I heard this, in the Blessed One's presence have I received this: This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction.' His statement is neither to be approved nor scorned. Without approval or scorn, take careful note of his words and make them stand against the Suttas and tally them against the Vinaya. If, on making them stand against the Suttas and tallying them against the Vinaya, you find that they don't stand with the Suttas or tally with the Vinaya, you may conclude: 'This is not the word of the Blessed One; this bhikkhu has misunderstood it' -- and you should reject it. But if... they stand with the Suttas and tally with the Vinaya, you may conclude: 'This is the word of the Blessed One; this bhikkhu has understood it rightly'," Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (D.16), trans. Thanissaro 1994: intro.

separate entities, each with their own goals and methods to achieve them.

To be vital and fertile, contemporary understandings must be rooted in the coherent framework offered by a particular living tradition. For it is the instructions contained in a seed that enable it to develop into a sapling and then a tree; it is due to these same strings of amino acids that various nutrients become organized into leaves and flowers; it is the tree's genetic inheritance that ensures its fruit contain the fertile seeds of a new generation.

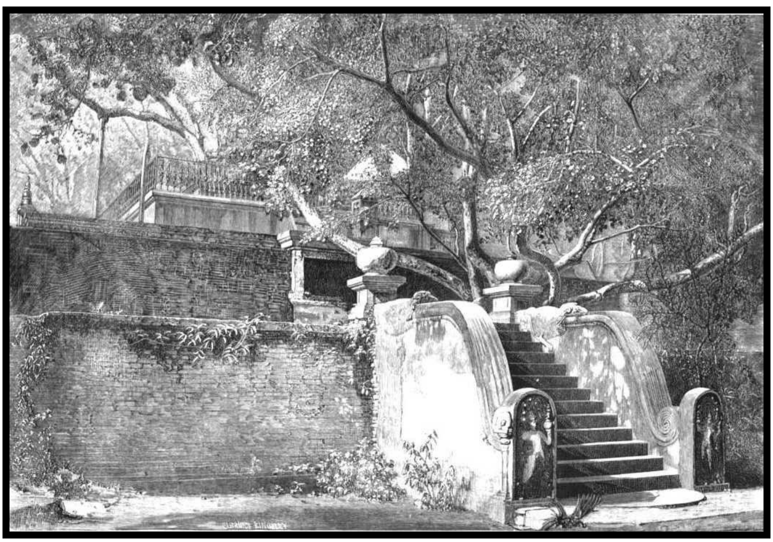
Strong Roots, Sweet Fruit

A majestic grove of *bodhi* trees stands at Anurādhapura, north central on the teardrop of Sri Laṅka. It is a bit of a climb up to the hilltop where the trees cluster, protected by stucco walls and venerated by pilgrims. The trees whose shade I enjoyed on a hot afternoon in the fall of 1999 are said to be descended from the cutting brought from northern India by the fully awakened nun Saṅghamittā Therī, daughter of Asoka.[13] Much like transplanting a cutting, the teachings were imported to Sri Laṅka along with many Indian cultural forms. On the island, these teachings could draw on familiar social sensibilities, a similar philosophical framework, and a closely related language. The institution of ordained communities that grew and developed in Sri Laṅka was eventually exported to Southeast Asia and beyond. The institutions of the Theravāda have grown strong and have grown old on the island, and with them those majestic symbols, the trees of awakening.

The transmission of the *Buddha-Sāsana* to the West resembles the sowing of a seed more than the transplantation of a cutting: very little of the Asian cultural context is included in the package. Burmese and Americans share many biological and linguistic

13 Malasekera 1974: vol. II, *s.v.* "Saṅghamittā Therī," 990.

structures, but our interpretive frameworks have also been shaped by very different cultural and personal histories. The teaching of 'the Doctrine and Discipline' is defined by such human contexts, I have argued; different people understand the practice very differently. If so, specific meanings are not inherent in the particular vocabulary and ideas transmitted from Burma to Barre; the same texts can be, and have been, interpreted very differently in various philosophical contexts. In order to effectively communicate the intention and genius of the Theravādin teachings, then, to be responsive to the audience and responsible to the source, new interpretations must present ideas in their traditional interpretive framework.



The Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura, Sri Laṅka
From a photograph by James Ricalton, late 1800s.

Are Americans today really interested in the Theravādin tradition, though, would they find a return to the source valuable? Andrew Olendzki has found in recent years that many Vipassanā pracitioners are becoming increasingly interested in study of the Pāḷi texts as their practice deepens over the course of decades. Taraṇiyā has observed "growing interest" in

traditions such as bowing, chanting, and offering alms food to nuns and monks.[14] Hundreds of Western students practice each year at centers in Burma such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's and Sayadaw U Lakkhaṇa's, where Vipassana Hawai'i has sponsored 'fusion' retreats in recent years. Many practitioners show great appreciation for the opportunity to gain access to the Mahāsi tradition in its native context; each year we have a wait list for the Kyaswa retreat.

Meditation teachers such as Michele McDonald are finding that, contrary to many expectations, the more the teachings are presented in their traditional framework, the more powerful and attractive they are for modern Americans.[15] This seems to be especially true of the newest generation of practitioners. A number of teenagers whom I met during the 2002 Young Adults course at IMS were already very well versed in theory and practice; some of their questions were wonderfully incisive, pushing the boundaries of my own thoughts on applying the Theravādin principles to modern life. At that same retreat, I also offered the traditional Pāḷi recitation of the five precepts for anyone who wished to follow along. To my surprise, nearly everyone in the hall joined in as we voiced Pāḷi formulas that have been used for thousands of years by practitioners making the commitment not to engage in killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, or use of intoxicants. I then explained the traditional way that Theravādins dedicate their practice to the attainment of the greatest happiness, which is peace. I stressed that these young people should feel no obligation to join in, that they should participate only if it felt right for them. To my great delight, the whole hall rang with beautiful young voices reciting a line I paraphrased as 'May this practice of skillful conduct create

14 Taraniya 2003: 7.
15 Personal communication, July 2002.

the conditions for the realization of the Unconditioned': "*Idaṁ me silaṁ nibbānassa paccayo hotu*."[16]

The liberation teachings of mindfulness meditation are gaining popularity in the United States, but as a holistic tradition of study and practice, this *Sāsana* is still young and vulnerable. I have discussed how the Theravādin tradition has been influenced by ancient Indian conceptions of existence as well as by modern Western ideas about 'Buddhism'; such instances demonstrate how practitioners' and scholars' understandings of a tradition shape and define it. If so, those of us who interpret 'the Doctrine and Discipline' for ourselves or for others have an important responsibility. As caretakers of the *Sāsana* at this crucial point in history, we need to be humble. We must take care not to assume that we can engineer a better tree, not to dismiss the Theravādin principles nor to dismiss new mutations that are consistent and coherent with the tradition. In North America, we are heavily influenced by individualistic values. It is especially important here to balance personal experience with an understanding of our own practice as part of a larger process: a tree of awakening that spans the continent and will mature over centuries, carrying a genetic heritage accumulated and tested over thousands of years of evolution.

"One suffers if dwelling without reverence or deference," the Buddha observes in the "Gārava Sutta."[17] In a recent interview, Steven expressed his deep thanks to Sayadaw U Paṇḍita for twenty years of guidance and mentorship; Sayadaw directed this

---

16 '*Nibānassa paccayo*' translates literally as 'cause of Nibbāna,' which would seem to imply that the Unconditioned is conditioned. This is one reason I prefer a variation more popular in Burma, '*Idaṁ me silaṁ magga phala ñāṇassa paccayo hotu*': 'May my skillful conduct create the conditions for the path and fruition insights'. I used the simpler version with '*nibanassa*' to avoid having to explain the traditional analysis of realization to the young adults in the midst of the precepts recitation, but in my English rendering of '<u>the realization</u> of *nibbāna*" I did incorporate the more philosophically sound aspiration.

17 Gārava Sutta (S.VI.2){I,140}, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

gratitude towards his own teacher, the Mahāsi Sayadaw, and in turn to the Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw, the Ale-Tawya Sayadaw, the The-Lon Sayadaw, and so on back to the Buddha. U Paṇḍita cited a discourse from the Pāḷi on the two types of people that are "Hard to Find": those who give freely, without expecting anything return, and those who are grateful for and acknowledge what has been done for them.[18] As long as there are people acting in these two ways, Sayadaw said, the transmission of the teachings for awakening will be carried out in accord with the teachings themselves, and thus be triumphantly successful in generation after generation.

The practice of gratitude and reciprocity in a teacher-student relationship can be one of the most empowering and freeing aspects of *Dhamma-Vinaya*. When such a 'good friendship' reaches its perfection, there is no one there, just the *Dhamma* doing itself. I suggest that a similar relationship is possible in transmission between two cultures.

Operating from the principles of the Theravāda allows us to draw on a heritage of information about what has helped human beings awaken over the past twenty-five hundred years. My studies of the Mahāsi Sayadaw's teachings and the discourses of the Pāḷi, as well as my experiences practicing and interpreting at meditation retreats, have given me great confidence in the ability of the traditional interpretive principles to direct our investigations of contemporary questions. To whatever degree Americans continue to pay attention and pay respect to the source while we fulfill its potential, the *Sāsana* we receive will be – in a word – authentic.

> There are five things, Kassapa, that lead to the longevity of the true Dhamma, to its nondecay and nondisappearance. What are the five? Here the bhikkhus, the bhikkhunis, the male lay followers, and the female lay followers dwell with reverence and deference towards the Teacher; they dwell with reverence and

18 U Paṇḍita cited the Dullabha Sutta (A.II.119){I,87}, in an interview January 2003, which I helped to interpret.

deference towards the Dhamma; they dwell with reverence and deference towards the Saṅgha; they dwell with reverence and deference towards the training; they dwell with reverence and deference towards concentration. These, Kassapa, are the five things that lead to the longevity of the true Dhamma, to its nondecay and nondisappearance.[19]

19 Saddhammappatirūpaka Sutta (S.XVI.13){II,225}, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Glossary

abhidhamma: texts 'concerning the doctrine'; the *Piṭaka* containing analyses of psycho-physical phenomena and the process of liberation.[1]

abhiññā: knowing that directly confronts its object.

akālika: literally, 'timeless': immediate.

akusala: unskillful, especially for alleviating suffering. Opposite: *kusala*.[2]

anattā: nonself; lack of any solid, independent, lasting identity.

anicca: impermanence; the nature of experience to be in constant change.

anuggahita: support or protection, especially for developing right view.

arahat: (Sanskrit: *arahant*) fully awakened one, especially one who awakened after being taught. Compare *sammāsambuddha*.

attha (*aṭṭha*): welfare, benefit; purpose, goal; meaning. Compare *vacana*.

aṭṭhakathā: 'discussions on the meaning'; the Commentaries on the Pāḷi.

avijjā: not seeing clearly: delusion, ignorance. Opposite: *vijjā*.

bhāṇaka: reciter, especially one who orally memorizes Pāḷi texts.

bhāsā: language; dialect.

bhāvanā: increase, cultivation, production, and development; thence, the practice of mental culture or meditation.

bhikkhu: fully ordained monk; (as a form of address in the *suttas*) anyone undertaking the practice for liberation from suffering.[3]

---

1 Warder's translation of the term is cited in note 23 on p.44.

2 Please see the discussion regarding absolute values on p.161.

3 Please see the discussion of the Commentary's (DA.22) definition, "*paṭipattisampādakapuggala*," in note 7 on p.8.

bhikkhunī: fully ordained nun.
bodhi: awakening; (metaphorically) the realization that ends suffering.
bodhisatta: (Sanskrit: *bodhisattva*) a being on the way to awakening.
brahmana: (Sanskrit: *brahman*) a holy person; caste of Vedic priests.
buddha: awakened one; especially a *sammāsambuddha*.
dāna: generosity; generous giving.
deva: heavenly being: guardian spirit of a forest, mountain, or other realms.
dhamma: (Sanskrit: *dhṛma*) the order of things; truth, righteousness; doctrine, teaching, especially the Buddha's teachings for awakening.
diṭṭhi: way of seeing; perspective; view. From *dassa*: 'to see'.
dukkha: the suffering engendered by the impermanence of life, its lack of reliability.
gahapati: householder, especially middle class: an owner of the means of production.[4]
jhāna: absorption in an object of awareness due to concentration (*samādhi*).
kalyāṇamitta: a 'good friend': a mentor in the practice of awakening.
kamma: (Sanskrit: *kṛma*) action; volitional action and its results.
kamma-nimitta: 'image of one's actions', life flashing before one's eyes at the time of death.
kammapatha: 'course of action'; a psychologically-oriented form of *sīla*.[5]
kataññutā: gratitude; literally, 'knowing what was done'.[6]
kusala: skillful, especially for alleviating suffering. Opposite: *akusala*.[7]
loka: world; universe.
lokasaññī: "our experience of the world... in the sense that one need not grant any world apart from our experience."[8]
majjhima-paṭipadā: 'middle practice', the middle way, especially between the extremes of absolutism and nihilism.
mātika: list, register, tabulated summary, especially as framework for texts.
mettā: lovingkindness, unconditional love. From *mitta*: 'friend'.

4 Please see Chakravarti 1987: 65-98, for an comprehensive explanation.
5 Please see p.139.
6 *Kata* (pp. of *karoti*, 'do', 'make') + *-jña* ('to know'). This insight I owe to Berkwitz 2003: 587.
7 Please see the discussion regarding absolute values on p.161.
8 Katz 1989: 147-8, discussed on p.179.

micchā: wrong, contrary. Opposite: *sammā.*[9]

ñāṇa: wisdom, insight knowledge; particular stages of *vipassanā.*

nāma-rūpa: mental and physical sensation, the mind-body process.

nibbāna: (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*) extinguishing; (metaphorically) cessation of suffering.

pāḷi: text, especially those of the Theravādin *Tipiṭaka.*

paññā: wisdom, especially that due to the direct knowledge of *vipassanā.*

paramatthā: that which can be directly known: sensation. Compare *sammuti.*[10]

parinibbāna: the final unbinding of the mind-body process at the death of a fully awakened being.

pariyatti: theoretical study, especially of the Buddha's teachings.

paṭicca-samuppāda: dependent co-arising, the process by which various mental and physical aspects of existence (*nāma-rūpa*) cause each other to come into being.

paṭipatti: practical application, especially of the Buddha's teachings.

paṭivedha: 'penetration', realization, especially of the Buddha's teachings.

phassa: 'contact' between sense base and sense object, producing sensation.

saddhā: faith, confidence, conviction. Opposite: *vicikicchā.*

saddhamma: 'existing order of things': principles true across contexts; the true teachings. From *sant* (ppr. *atthi* 'to be'; good, true) + *dhamma.*[11]

samaṇa: renunciate; one 'living in calmness'.[12]

samādhi: concentration or unification of attention.

samatha: tranquility due to concentration (*samādhi*).

sammā: "just right": complete, correct, harmonious, balanced.[13] Opposite: *micchā.*

sammāsambuddha: one who discovers the correct path to full awakening without a teacher or teachings and then initiates a tradition of awakening (*buddha-sāsana*).

---

9 Please see the discussion regarding absolute values on p.161.

10 The definition of *paramatthā* given by Paṇḍita 1993 is quoted on p.180.

11 Rhys Davids 1999: *s.v.* "saddhamma," 675.

12 "*samacariyā*," as per Dhp.388{Dhp.,56}.

13 Please see Thanissaro Bhikkhu's definition of '*sammā*' on p.118, and the discussion regarding absolute values on p.161.

sammuti: 'conventional' or commonly accepted truth or reality. Compare *paramatthā*.

saṃsāra: the cycle of suffering, the continuance of existence due to craving.

sandiṭṭhika: directly visible, experientially verifiable.

saṅgha: gathering; community, especially of monks and nuns, noble ones who have entered the stream of awakening, or those who follow the Buddha's teachings.

saṅghāyana: official gathering of the *saṅgha* to collate authentic teachings.

saṅkharā: conditioned phenonmena; mental states; formed habits.

sāsana: message, teachings; thence, "cumulative tradition" of study, practice, and realization, especially that initiated by the Buddha.[14]

sati: remembering; continously returning to an object of attention; mindfulness: continous attention to present physical and mental sensations (*nāma-rūpa*).

satipaṭṭhāna: the establishment of mindfulness (*sati*).[15]

sīla: (skillful) conduct. Abbreviation of *kusala sīla*.

sutta: (Sanskrit: *sūkta*) text, discourse, especially those of the Pāḷi.[16]

tathāgata: one 'thus gone', one fully awakened.

Theravāda: 'Doctrine of the Elders', a tradition descended through medieval (Sri) Laṅka from the conservative *Sthaviravāda* faction of the Buddha's followers.

Tipiṭaka: the 'three baskets' of texts compiled by followers of the Buddha.

upādāna: clinging; sustenance for the fires of clinging: *nāma-rūpa*.

upāya: (skillful) 'approach' or means. Abbreviation of *upāya kusalo*.

vacana: expression, designation, word, term. Compare *attha*.

vaṁsa: bamboo; a type of chronicle tracing lineages of succession.

vicikicchā: doubt and indecision. Opposite: *saddhā*.

vijjā: clear seeing of the process of sensation. Opposite: *avijjā*.

vimutti: release, liberation, especially from the cycle of suffering (*saṃsāra*).

---

14 The definition of a "cumulative tradition" given by Smith 1978 is discussed on p.62.

15 Please see note 1 on p.2.

16 According to Vetter 1988: vii, the Sanskrit '*sūkta*' ('well-spoken') is the actual cognate of the Pāḷi '*sutta*' while '*sūtra*' ('thread') is a later mistranslation.

vinaya: discipline, especially the rules in the Pāḷi for nuns and monks.
vipassanā: seeing the chaos of life as chaotic; awareness of experience as impermanent, unsatisfying, and nonself. Often glossed as 'insight'.
viriya: courageous energy, heroic effort. From *vīra*: 'hero'.
yāna: motion; means of motion, vehicle, especially to awakening.
yathābhūta: things 'just as they have come to be'.[17]
yogi: 'one making effort' in the practice for liberation from suffering.

17 Please see the discussion of Kaluphana's definition in note 2 on p.243.

Illustration Index

Photos used with the generous permission of the respective copyright holders.

18 Ricalton 1891.

Bibliography

Tipitaka Pāḷi and Aṭṭhakathā (Canon and Commentaries)

A Note on References: abbreviations for Pāḷi texts or Aṭṭhakathā to them are given in the following sequence: *Nikāya* (first letter only) or *Khuddaka* section (standard abbreviations). Roman numeral of *Saṁyutta* (S), *Nipata* (A), or *Vagga* (Khd.). *Sutta* number: verse (if specified). PTS volume and page in brackets.

Chaṭṭha Saṅghāyana CD-ROM, 1999: Version 3.0, Dhammagiri, Igatpuri, India: Vipassana Research Institute.

The Pāḷi in Translation

A Note on References: location in the Pāḷi (as per above) and translator(s) are used to specify one of the following sources:

Bodhi, Bhikkhu (tr.), 2000: *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṁyutta Nikāya,* Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Jayawickrama, N. A. (tr.), 1962: *Inception of the Discipline* (Vinaya-Nidāna), London: Luzac & Co.

Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, original translation, edited and revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2001 (1995): *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya,* 2nd edition, Boston: Wisdom Publications in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

Nyanaponika (Ñāṇapoṇika) Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. and ed., 1999: *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Aṅguttara Nikāya,* The Sacred Literature Series of the International Sacred Literature Trust, Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (tr.) 2002: "Sutta Pitaka: The Basket of Suttas (selected suttas)," *Access to Insight*, 9 Sept. 2002, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta.html.

Walshe, Maurice (tr.), 1995 (1987): *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya,* Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Other Sources

Anālayo, 2003: *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications.

Armstrong, Steven, 1999: "The Five Precepts: Supporting Our Relationships," in *Voices of Insight*, Sharon Salzberg (ed.), Boston: Shambala, pp.216-30.

Armstrong, Guy, 2003: "Did the Buddha Say That? Guy Armstrong and Matthew Grad talk about sutta study," *Spirit Rock News*, vol.16, no.1 (March-September), pp.3.

Batchelor, Stephen, 1994: *The Awakening Of The West: The Encounter Of Buddhism And Western Culture*, Berkeley: Parallax.

Batchelor, Stephen, 1997: *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, New York: Riverhead Books.

Batchelor, Stephen, 2000: "Lessons of History," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, no. 38 (Winter), pp.41ff.

Batchelor, Stephen, 2002: "At the Crossroads: An interview with Stephen Batchelor," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, no.45 (Fall), pp.54-5.

Bechert, Heinz, 1991 (1984): "To Be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist': Buddhism in Burma," in *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist monks and nuns in society and culture*, Richard Gombrich and Heinz Bechert (ed.), New York: Thames & Hudson, pp.147-158.

Berkwitz, Stephen C., 2003: "History and Gratitude," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol.71, no.3 (Sept.), pp.579-604.

Birjepatil, J., 2001: Introduction to *Ten Short Stories by Suresh Joshi*, J. Birjepatil (ed.), New Delhi: Sahita Akademi.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1985: "Two Faces of the Dhamma," *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, Cover Essay No.2 (Autumn).

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1987: "Dhamma without Rebirth?," *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, Cover essay No.6 (Spring).

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1988: "A Look at the Kalama Sutta," *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, Cover essay No. 9.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1990: *Nourishing the Roots: Essays on Buddhist Ethics*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu (ed.); Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (tr.), 1991: *The Discourse on Right View*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu (tr.)Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1993: "Tolerance and Diversity," *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, Cover essay No.24 (Summer-Fall).

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1994: "Dhamma and Non-duality," *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, Cover essay No. 27 (2nd mailing).

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 1996: "Message for a Globalized World," *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, Cover essay No.34 (3rd mailing).

Bodhi, Bhikkhu, gen. ed., 2000 (1993): *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma: the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha of Ācariya Anuruddha*, Seattle, Washington: BPS Pariyatti Editions.

Bond, George, 1982: *The Word of the Buddha: The Tripiṭaka and its Interpretation in Theravada Buddhism*, Colombo: Gunasena and Co..

Bond, George, 1996: "Theravāda Buddhism's Two Formulations," in *Pali Buddhism*, Frank J. Hoffman and Deegalle Mahinda (ed.), Surrey, Richmond: Curzon Press, pp.17-42.

Boorstein, Sylvia, 1999a: "Perfecting the Heart," in *Voices of Insight*, Sharon Salzberg (ed.), Boston: Shambala, pp.90-8.

Boorstein, Sylvia, 1999b: "Seeing the Teachings as Teacher," in *Voices of Insight*, Sharon Salzberg (ed.), Boston: Shambala, pp.206-15.

Boucher, Sandy, 1988: *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*, San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Bullit, John, 2002: "Frequently Asked Questions about Buddhism,"*Access to Insight*, 22 Dec., http://www.accesstoinsight.org/bfaq.html.

Carter, John Ross, 1977: "A History of Early Buddhism," *Religious Studies*, no.13, pp.263-287.

Chakravarti, Uma, 1987: *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Coleman, James, 2001: *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Collins, Steven, 1990a: "On The Very Idea of the Pali Canon," *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol.15, pp.127-38.

Collins, Steve, 1990b (1982): *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Collins, Steven, 1992: "Notes on Some Oral Aspects of Pali Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol.35, no.2 & 3 (July), pp.121-35.

Cook, Roger, 1988 (1974): *The Tree of Life*, New York: Thames & Hudson.

Coward, Harold, 1992: "The Role of Scripture in the Self-definition of Hinduism and Buddhism in India," *Sutdies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, vol.21, no.2, pp.129-44.

Culliney, John, 1988: *Islands in a Far Sea: Nature and Man in Hawaii*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

Eliot, Sir Charles, 1962: *Hinduism and Buddhism: an historical sketch*, London: Routledge & K. Paul.

Epstein, Mark, 1988: "The Deconstruction of the Self: Ego and 'Egolessness' in Buddhist Insight Meditation," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, vol.20, no.1, pp.61-9.

Evola, Julius; Musson, H.E. (tr.), 1996: *The Doctrine of Awakening: The Attainment of Self-Mastery According to the Earliest Buddhist Texts*, [La dottrina del risveglio, 1943], Vermont, Rochester: Inner Traditions.

Faure, Brenard, 1994 (1991): *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ferguson, John P., 1978: "The Quest for Legitimation by Burmese Monks and Kings: the case of the Shwegyin Sect (19th-20th Centuries)," in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, Bardwel L. Smith (ed.), Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, pp.66-99.

Fergusson, James, 1971 (1868): *Tree and Serpent Worship: or, Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India in the First and Fourth Centuries after Christ from the Sculptures of the Buddhist Topes at Sanchi and Amaravati*, Delhi: Oriental Publishers.

Fields, Rick, 1996: "A High History of Buddhism," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.45-58.

Foucault, Michel, 1982 (1971): *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language, [L'ordre du discours]*, Translated by A.M. Sheridan SmithNew York: Pantheon Books.

Fronsdal, Gil, 1998: "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (ed.), Berkeley, California: University of California Press, pp.163-82.

Garfield, Jay L., 2002: *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Geertz, Clifford, 2000 (1973): *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, New York: Basic Books.

Gimello, Robert, 1978: "Mysticism and Meditation," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Steven T. Katz (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, pp.170-99.

Gimello, Robert, 1983: "Mysticism in Its Contexts," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, Steven T. Katz (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, pp.61-88.

Goldstein, Joseph, 1993a: "Empty Phenomena Rolling On: An Interview with Joseph Goldstein," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.3, no.2 (Winter), pp.13-8.

Goldstein, Joseph, 1993b: Forward to *In This Very Life*, Kate Wheeler (ed.), Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.

Goldstein, Joseph, 1993c: *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*, Boston: Shamabala.

Goldstein, Joseph, 2002: *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Goldstein, Joseph, 2003: Forward to *Knee Deep in Grace: The Extraordinary Life and Teaching of Dipa Ma*, by Amy Schmidt, North Carolina, Lake Junaluska: Present Perfect Books.

Gombrich, Richard, 1991a (1984): "The Evolution of the Saṅgha," in *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist monks and nuns in society and culture*, Richard Gombrich and Heinz Bechert (ed.), New York: Thames & Hudson, pp.77-89.

Gombrich, Richard, 1991b (1988): *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Gombrich, Richard, 1996 (1994): *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, London: Athlone.

Gombrich, Richard and Gananath Obeyesekere, 1988: *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Grady, Narayan Liebenson, 1999: "Refuge in the Sangha," in *Voices of Insight*, Sharon Salzberg (ed.), Boston: Shamabala, pp.109-205.

Hallisey, Charles, 1995: "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, Donald Lopez (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.31-61.

Hamilton, William L., 1995: *Saints & Psychopaths*, California, San Jacinto: Dharma Audio Network Associates.

Hoffman, Frank J., 1992: "Evam Me Sutaṃ: Oral Tradition in Nikāya Buddhism," in *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, Jeffrey R. Timm (ed.), Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, pp.195-219.

Houtman, Gustaaf, 1999: *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

Jutima, Ven. Ani, 2002: "Full Ordination for Nuns Restored in Sri Lanka," *Insight Journal*, Spring, pp.30-1.

Kabat-Zinn, Jon, 1990: *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, New York: Delta.

Kabat-Zinn, Jon, 1998: "Toward the Mainstreaming of American Dharma Practice," in *Buddhism in America: Proceedings of the First Buddhism in America Conference*, Al Rapaport (ed.), Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, pp.478-528.

Kalupahana, David J., 1976: *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Kalupahana, David J., 1979: "Empiricism in Early Buddhism and William James," in *Narada Mahathera Felcitation Volume*, Piyadassi Thera (ed.), Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, pp.76-88.

Kalupahana, David J., 1992: *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Katz, Nathan, 1989 (1982): *Buddhist Images of Human Perfection*, Delhi: Motital Banarsidass.

King, Winston L., 1976: "Contemporary Burmese Buddhism," in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, Heinrich Dumoulin and John Maraldo (ed.), (ed.), New York: MacMillan, pp.81-98.

Kornfield, Jack, 1993: *A Path with Heart*, Boston: Bantam Books.

Kornfield, Jack, 1995: "Domains of Consciousness: An Interview with Jack Kornfield," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.34-40.

Kornfield, Jack, 1996: "Domains of Consciousness: An Interview with Jack Kornfield," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.34-40.

Kornfield, Jack, 1999: "Path of Parenting, Path of Awakening," in *Voices of Insight*, Sharon Salzberg (ed.), Boston: Shambala, pp.240-52.

Kornfield, Jack, 2000: "The Sure Heart's Release: An Interview with Jack Kornfield," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.9, no.4 (Summer), pp.37ff.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, 1980: *The Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lancaster, L.R., 1994: s.v. "Buddhist Canons: Translations," in *Encyclopedia of Language and Literature*, R.E. Asher (ed.), New York: Pergamon Press.

Lenior, Fredric, 1999: "The Adaptation of Buddhism to the West," *Diogenes*, no.47 (Fall), pp.100ff.

Lopez, Donald, 1988: *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Lopez, Donald, 1998: *The Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Chicago: University of Chicago.

Lottermoser, Dr. Friedgard, 1991: "Buddhist Nuns in Burma," *Sakyaditha Newsletter*, vol.2, no.2 (Summer), accessed online, http://www2.hawaii.edu/~tsomo/NewsLetters/2-2.htm#Burma.

Lottman, Herbert R., : "France's campaign to protect 'la langue'," *Publishers Weekly*, vol.241, no.42 (17 October), pp.16-7.

Mahāsi Sayadaw; Nyi Nyi, U (tr.), 1978: *Practical Vipassanā Meditational Exercises*, Rangoon: Zwe Publishing House.

Mahāsi Sayadaw, 1980: *To Nibbāna via the Noble Eightfold Path*, U Htin Fatt (Maung Htin) (tr.), Rangoon: U Ba Glay.

Mahāsi Sayadaw; Aye Maung, U (tr.), 1982: *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, Rangoon: Buddhasāsana Nuggaha Organization.

Mahāsi Sayadaw; Aye Maung, U (tr.), 1986 (1980): *A discourse on Ariyāvāsa*, Rangoon: U Lay Maung.

Mahāsi Sayadaw; Ko Lay, U (tr.), 1989 (1983): *The Great Discourse on the Anattālakkhaṇa Sutta*, Rangoon: Rangoon: Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization.

Mahāsi Sayadaw; Maung Tha Noe (tr.), 1990 (1979): *Mahāsi Abroad: Lectures by the Mahāsi Sayadaw on his World Missionary Tour*, Malaysia, Selangor: Selangor Buddhist Vipassana Meditation Society.

Mahāsi Sayadaw, 1992 (1981): *On the Nature of Nibbāna*, Malaysia: Subang Jaya Buddhist Association.

Malasekera, G.P., 1974: *Dictionary of Pāḷi Proper Names*, London: Pali Text Society.

Maraldo, John C., 1986: "Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol.19, no.1, pp.17-43.

McDonald, Michele, 1996: "On the Front Lines: An interview with Michele McDonald-Smith," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.67-70.

McDonald-Smith, Michele, 2000: "Interview With Michele McDonald Smith," *Spirit Rock News*, March, accessed online, http://www.vipassanahawaii.org/articles/michele_src_interview.htm.

McKenna, Terrence, 1996: "Sacred Antidotes: An Interview with Terrence McKenna," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.94-7.

Mendelson, E. Michael, 1975: *Saṅgha and State in Burma: A Study in Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership*, John P. Ferguson (ed.), Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Myanmar-English Dictionary, 1994: Yangon: Department of the Myanmar Language Commission.

Nai Pan Hla, 1998: "Kyansitta and the Indic Words in Myanmar from Mon," *Mon-Khmer Studies*, vol.28, pp.19-30.

Ñāṇananda, Bhikkhu, 1997 (1971): *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Ñāṇapoṇika Thera, 1988 (1962): *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser.

Ñāṇapoṇika Thera, 1998 (1949): *Abhidhamma Studies: Researches in Buddhist Psychology*, Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Narada Mahāthera, alias Thaton Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw, 1999: *Milindapañha-Aṭṭhakathā,*, Madhav Deshpande: The Internation Institute for Buddhist Studies.

Norman, K.R., 1984: "On Translating from Pāḷi," *One Vehicle: Journal of the National University of Singapore Buddhist Society*, , pp.77-87.

Numrich, Paul D., 1996: *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Olendzki, Andrew, 2000: "Meditation, Healing, and Stress Reduction," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, Christopher S. Queen (ed.), Boston: Wisdom Publications, pp.307-27.

Olendzki, Andrew, trans., 2002: "Skinny Gotami (Therīgāthā-a akathā 10.1)," *Insight Journal*, Spring, pp.40-1.

Paṇḍita, Sayadaw U; Aggacitta, U (tr.), 1993: *In This Very Life*, Kate WheelerKandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Paṇḍita, Sayadaw U; Kyaw Kyaw, U (tr.), 1994: *Raindrops in Hot Summe*, Thamanay Kyaw and Araññavāsī (ed.), Penang: Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre.

Paṇḍita, Sayadaw U, 1995: *On the Path of Freedom: A Mind of Wise Discernment and Openness*, Mya Thaung (tr.), Petalaug Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Buddhist Wisdom Centre.

Paṇḍita, Sayadaw U, 2003: "Interview," *Insight Journal*, Fall, pp.?.

Prebish, Charles S., 1999: *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Proudfoot, Wayne, 1985: *Religious Experience*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Rahula, Walpola, 1974: *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, Translated by K.P.G. Wijayasurendra and revised by the author, New York: Grove Press.

Ram Dass et al., 1995: "The Roundtable with Ram Dass, Joan Halifax, Robert Aitken, Richard Baker," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.101-109.

Rand, Yvonne, 1995: "Abortion: A Respectful Meeting Ground," in *Buddhism Though American Women's Eyes*, Karma Lekshe Tsomo (ed.), Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, pp.85-9.

Ratnayaka, Shanta, 1984: "The Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravāda," *One Vehicle: Journal of the National University of Singapore Buddhist Society*, , pp.121-33.

Ray, Reginald A., 2002: "Will it be One or Many?," *Buddharma*, Fall, pp.67-9.

Rhys Davids, T.W. (et al.), 1999 (1921): *Pāli-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Pali Text Society.

Ricalton, James, 1891: "The City of the Sacred Bo-Tree (Anuradhapura)," *Scribner's Magazine*, vol.10, no.3 (Sept.), pp.319-35.

Ringgren, Helmer, 1987: s.v."Messianism: An Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade (ed.), New York: MacMillan.

Said, Edward, 1978: *Orientalism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Schmidt, Karl J., 1995: *An Atlas and Survey of South Asian History*, New York, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.

Seager, Richard Hughes, 1999: *Buddhism in America*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Seckel, Dietrich; Keep, Ann E. (tr.), 1964: *The Art of Buddhism*, [Kunst des Buddhismus], New York: Crown Publishers.

Sharf, Robert, 1995: "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen*, vol.42, pp.228-83.

Sīlānandābhivaṁsa, Ashin, 1982: *The Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw: Biography*, Abridged Edition, Part I, Translated by U Min Swe.Yangon: Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 1978 (1963): *The Meaning and End of Religion*, San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Smith, Steven, 1999: "Sacred Friendship: Bridge to Freedom," in *Voices of Insight*, Sharon Salzberg (ed.), Boston: Shambala, pp.78-89.

Soma Thera, 1981: *The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Spiro, Melford, 1982: *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, Berkley: University of California Press.

Sponberg, Alan, 1997: "Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion," in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, Mary Evelyn Tucker and Ducan Ryūken Williams (ed.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp.351-76.

Steiner, George, 1978: *On Difficulty and other essays*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Steiner, George, 1984: *George Steiner: A Reader*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Steiner, George, 1998 (1975): *After Babel*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Strassman, Rick, M.D., 2003: "Stepping on Holy Toes,", 21 Oct., Chapter 20 of DMT: The Spirit Molecule. http://www.american-buddha.com/stepping.holy.toes.htm#STEPPING%20ON%20HOLY%20TOES.

Surya Das, 1996: "What Does Being a Buddhist Mean to You?," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.43.

Swearer, Donald K., 1987: s.v. "Buddhism: Buddhism in Southeast Asia," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade (ed.), New York: MacMillan.

Sweetser, Eve, 1998 (1990): *From Etymology to Pragmatics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Tannen, Deborah, 1994: *Gender and Discourse*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Taraniya Ambrosia, Gloria , 2003: "A Builder of Bridges," *Insight Journal*, vol.20 (Spring), pp.4-8.

Than, Tin Maung Maung, 1993: "Saṅgha Reforms and Renewal of Sasana in Myanmar: Historical Trends and Contemporary Practice," in *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia*, Trevor Ling (ed.), Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp.6-63.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1994: *The Buddhist Monastic Code: The Patimokkha Training Rules Translated and Explained*, Valley Center, California: Metta Forest Monastery.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1996: *Wings to Awakening: An Anthology from the Pali Canon*, Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana Publications.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1998: "Survival Tactics for the Mind," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, vol.30 (Winter), pp.64-9.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1999: *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, Massachusetts, Barre: Dhamma Dana Publications.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (tr.), 2001: "Mulapariyaya Sutta,", 9 May, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/majjhima/mn001.html .

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2002a: "Dharma Dictionary: Satipatthana," *Bodhidharma*, Fall, pp.96.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2002b: "When You Know For Yourselves': the authenticity of the Pali Suttas,"*Access to Insight*, 7 Sept. 2002, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/modern/thanissaro/authenticity.html.

"Results from the Tricycle Poll: Help or Hindrance?," 1996: Tricycle: The Buddhist Review, vol.6, no.1 (Fall), pp.44.

Tweed, Thomas, 1992: *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Tworkov, Helen, 1989: *Zen in America*, San Francisco: North Point Press.

Vetter, Tilmann, 1988: *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, Netherlands, Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Walsh, Roger, 1981: "Speedy Western Minds Slow Slowly," *Revision*, Spring, pp.75-7.

Walters, Jonathan S., 1999: "Suttas as History: Four Approaches to the Sermon on the Noble Quest (Ariyapariyesana Sutta)," *History of Religions*, vol.38, no.3 (February), pp.247ff.

Warder, A.K., 2000: *Indian Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass.

Warner, Richard, 1973: "To Kill a Honeycreeper," *Natural History*, 82, pp.30ff.

Williams, Paul, 2001 (1989): *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, London: Routledge.

Williams, Duncan Ryūken and Christopher S. Queen (ed.), 1999: *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press.